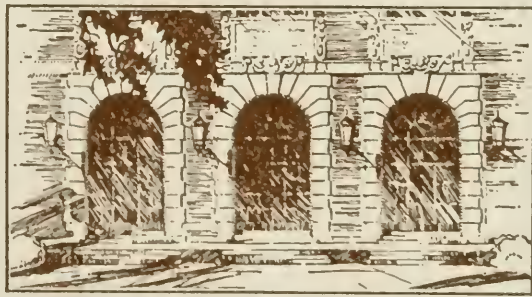


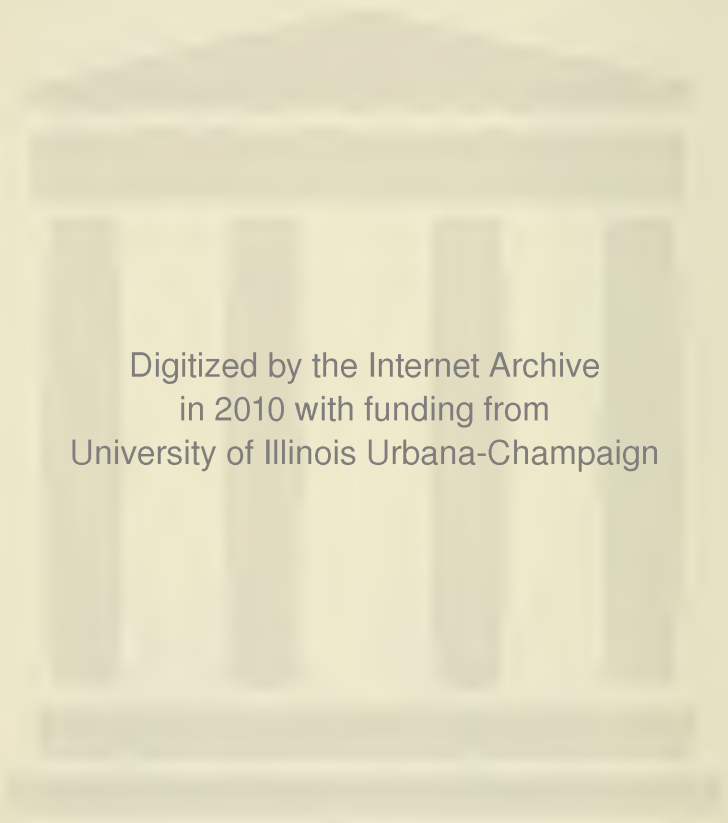
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VOL. II.

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M. O R N.

"SIMILIA SIMILIBUS CURANTUR."

BY G. J. WHYTE-MELVILLE,

AUTHOR OF "DIGBY GRAND," "CERISE," "THE GLADIATORS," ETC.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOLUME II.

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M. OR N.

“ Similia similibus curantur.”



CHAPTER I.

“ MISSING—A GENTLEMAN.”

“ **A**GE about thirty. Height five feet nine inches and a half—fair complexion—light grey eyes—small reddish-brown whiskers, close trimmed,—short dark hair. Speaks fast, in a high key, and has a habit of drawing out his shirt-sleeves from beneath his cuffs.—When last seen, was dressed in a dark surtout, fancy neck-tie, black cloth waistcoat, Oxford-mixture trousers, and Balmoral boots.—Wore a black hat with maker’s name inside—Block and Co., 401 Regent Street. Whoever will give such information to the authorities as may lead to

the discovery of the above, shall receive—
A Reward!"

Such was the placard that afforded a few minutes' speculation for the few people who had leisure to read it, one fine morning about a week after Mrs. Stanmore's eventful ball, and towards the close of the London season; eliciting, at the same time, criticism not altogether favourable on the style of composition affected by our excellent police. The man was missing, no doubt, and had been missing for some days, before anxiety created by his absence, growing into alarm for his safety, had produced the foregoing advertisement, prompted by certain affectionate misgivings of Mr. Barge, since the lost sheep was none other than his nephew, Tom Ryfe. The old man felt, indeed, seriously discomposed by the prolonged absence of this, the only member of his family. It was unjustifiable, as he remarked twenty times a day, unfeeling, unheard-of, unaccountable. He rang for the servants at his private residence, every quarter of an hour or so, to

learn if the truant had returned. He questioned the boy at the office sharply and repeatedly, as to orders left with him by Mr. Ryfe before he went away, only to gather from the answers of this urchin, who would indeed have forgotten any number of such directions, that he looked on the present period of anxiety in the light of a holiday and festival, devoutly praying that his taskmaster might never come back again. Finally, in despair, poor Bargrave cast himself on the sympathy of Dorothea, who listened to his bewailings with stolid indifference, when sober, and replied to them by surmises of the wildest improbability, when drunk.

Alas! in common with so many others of her class, the charwoman took refuge from care in constant inebriety. Her imagination, thus stimulated, pointed, like that of some old Castilian adventurer, steadily to the west.

“Lor, Mr. Bargrave!” she would say, staring helplessly in his face, and yielding to the genial hiccough which refused to be kept

down, "he be gone to 'Merriky, poor dear—to better hisself—I make no doubt. Don't ye take on so. It's a weary world—it is—and that's where he be gone, for sure!"

Yet she knew quite well where he was hidden all the time; and, inasmuch as she had some regard for her kind old employer, the knowledge almost drove her mad. Therefore it was that Dorothea, harassed by conflicting feelings, drowned her sorrows perseveringly in the bowl.

For a considerable period this poor woman had suffered a mental torture, the severest, perhaps, to which her sex can be subjected. She had seen the man she loved—and, though she was only a drudge, and not by any means a tidy one, she could love very dearly,—she had seen, I say, the man she loved gradually learning to despise her affection, and to estrange himself from her society. She was a good deal afraid of "Gentleman Jim;" perhaps she liked him none the less for that,—and dared neither tax him with falsehood, nor try

to worm out of him the assurance that she had, or had not a rival. Nevertheless, she was determined to ascertain the cause of her lover's indifference to herself, and his changed conduct in other relations of life.

Jim had always been somewhat given to the adornment of his person, affecting that flash and gaudy style of decoration so much in favour with dog-stealers and men of like dubious professions. Of late, however, he had adopted, with different tastes and habits, a totally different costume—when “off duty,” as he called it—meaning thereby release from the fulfilment of some business engagement subject to penalties affixed by our criminal code. He now draped himself in white linen, dark-coloured clothes, a tall hat, and such outward marks of respectability, if not station, going even so far as to invest in kid gloves and an “umbrellier,” as he called that instrument. At first sight, but for his boots, Jim might almost have been mistaken for a real gentleman. About this period, too, he left off

vulgar liquors, and shamefully abandoned a short black pipe that had stuck by him through many ups and downs, substituting for these stimulants a great deal of brown sherry, and certain sad-coloured cigars, demanding strong lungs and a strong stomach as well. These changes did the forlorn Dorothea note with increasing anxiety, and, because every woman becomes keen-sighted and quick-witted where her heart is concerned, drew from them an augury fatal to her future happiness. After a while, when the suspense grew intolerable, she resolved on putting a stop to it by personal inquiry, and with that view, as a preliminary, kept herself tolerably sober for twenty-four hours, during which probationary period she instituted a grand "clean up" of his premises; and so, as she mentally expressed it, "with a cool 'ead and a clean 'ouse and a clear conscience," confronted her employer on the stairs.

Old Bargrave had of late become very nervous and uneasy. The full meals, the daily

bottle of port, the life of self-indulgence, though imparting an air of portliness and comfort while everything went well, had unfitted him sadly for a contest with difficulty or reverse. Like the fat troop-horse, that looks so sightly on parade, a week's campaigning reduced him to a miserable object—flabby, shrunk, dispirited, and with a sinking heart at least, if not a sore back.

Dorothea's person blocked up the staircase before him, or he would have slipped by and locked himself unnoticed in his chambers. “Can I speak with you, sir?” said the char-woman. “Now, sir, if you please. H'immediate.”

Old Bargrave trembled. “Certainly, Dorothea—certainly. What is it, my good girl? You've heard something. They've traced him—they've found him. One minute, my good girl. One minute, if you please.”

He had preceded her through the office to his own inner room, and now, shaking all over, sat down in his easy-chair, pressing both

hands hard on its arms to steady himself. Dorothea, staring helplessly at the wall over his head, made a muff of her apron, and curt-sied—nothing more.

“Speak!” gasped the old gentleman, convulsively.

“It’s my h’aunt, if you please, sir,” said Dorothea, with another curtsey.

“D—n your aunt!” vociferated Bargrave. “It’s my nephew! Have you heard nothing? I’m hasty, my good girl; I’m anxious. I—I haven’t another relation in the world. Have they told you anything more?”

Dorothea began to cry. “He be gone to ’Meriker, for sure,” she whimpered, trying back on the old consolatory suggestion—“to better hisself, no doubt. It’s me, sir; that’s my h’aunt. She’s wuss this turn; an’ if so be as you could spare me for the day, I’ve been and cleaned up everythink, and I’d wipe over that there table and shake the dust out o’ them curtains in five minutes, and——”

“That will do—that will do!” exclaimed

the old gentleman, aghast, as well he might be, at the proposal, since none of the furniture in question had been subjected to such a process for years, and immediate suffocation, with intolerable confusion of papers, must have been the result. “If you want to go and see your aunt, my girl, go, in heaven’s name! I can spare you as long as you like. But you mustn’t tidy up here. No; that would never do. And, Dorothea, if you should hear anything, come and tell me that instant. Never mind the expense. I’d give a great deal to know he was safe. Ah! I’d give all I have in the world to see him back again.”

She curtsied and hurried out, leaving Bargrave to immerse himself in law-papers and correspondence. From sheer force of habit he took refuge in his daily work at this hour of anxiety and sad distress. In such sorrows it is well for a man to have disciplined his mind till it obeys him instinctively, like a managed steed bearing its rider at will out of the crowd of assailants by whom he is beset.

Dorothea, scrubbing her face with yellow soap till it shone again, proceeded to array herself in raiment of many colours, and, when got up to her own satisfaction, scuttled off to a distant part of London, making use of more than one omnibus in her journey, and so, returning almost upon her tracks, confronted Gentleman Jim as he emerged from his usual house of call in the narrow street out of Holborn.

He started, and his face lengthened with obvious disgust.

“What’s up now, lass?” said he. “I’ve business to-night. D’ye mind? Blessed if my mouth isn’t as dry as a cinder-heap. You go home, like a good gal, and I’ll take ye to the theaytre, perhaps, to-morrow. I haven’t a minnit to stop. I didn’t ought to be here now.”

The promised treat; the hurried manner; above all, the affected kindness of tone, roused her suspicions to the utmost, and Dorothea was woman enough to feel for the moment that

she dared match her wits against those of her betrayer.

“It’s lucky,” she answered, coolly; “for I’ve got to be home afore dark, and they’re lighting the lamps now. I’ve been down to see arter him, Jim, an’ I thought I’d just step round and let you know. I footed it all the way back; that’s why I’m so late now.”

She paused and looked steadily in his face.

“Well?” said Jim, turning very pale, while his eyes glared in hers with a wild, horrible meaning.

She answered his look rather than his exclamation.

“He’s a trifle better since morning. He don’t know nothing yet. Nor he won’t, neither, not for a while to come. But he ain’t a goin’ to die, Jim; not this turn.”

His colour came back, and he laughed brutally. “Blast him! D’ye think I care?” said he, with a wild flourish of his arm, but added, in a quieter voice, “Perhaps it’s as well, lass. Cold meat isn’t very handy to hide, and he’s worth more alive than dead. I

couldn't hardly keep from laffin' this mornin' when I saw them bills. I'll stand ye a drop, lass, if you're dry, but I mustn't stop with ye to drink it."

Dorothea declined this liberal offer. "Good-night, Jim," said she, and turned coldly away. She had no heart for a more affectionate farewell; and could their positions have been reversed he must have detected something strange in this unusual lack of cordiality; but men are seldom close observers in such matters, and Jim was full of his own interests, his own projects, his own wild, senseless infatuation.

He watched her round her homeward turn, and then started off at a quick pace in an opposite direction. With all his cunning he would never have suspected that Dorothea, whose intellect he considered little better than an idiot's, could presume to dog his footsteps; and the contempt he entertained for her—of which she was beginning to be uncomfortably conscious—no doubt facilitated this unhappy creature's operations.

Overhead the sky was dark and lowering, the air thick, as before thunder; and though the gaslights streamed on every street in London, it was an evening well suited to watch an unsuspecting person, unobserved.

Dorothea, returning on her footsteps, kept Jim carefully in sight, walking from twenty to fifty yards behind him, and as much as possible on the other side of the street. There was no danger of her losing him. She could have followed that figure—to her the type of comeliness and manhood—all over the world, but she dreaded, with a fear that was almost paralyzing, the possibility of his turning back and detecting that he was tracked. “He’d murder me, for sure,” thought Dorothea, trembling in every limb; nevertheless, the love that is strong as death, the jealousy that is cruel as the grave, goaded her to persevere; and so she flitted in his wake with a noiseless step, wonderfully gliding and ghostlike, considering the solidity of her proportions.

Jim turned out of Oxford Street to stop at

an ill-looking, dirty little house, the door of which seemed to open to him of its own accord. She spied a small grocer's shop nearly opposite, not yet shut up. To dodge rapidly in, and sit down for a few minutes, while she cheapened a couple of ounces of tea, afforded Dorothea an excellent chance of watching his further movements unseen.

He emerged again almost immediately, with a false beard and a pair of spectacles, carrying a large parcel carefully wrapped in oiled silk. Then, after looking warily up and down the street, turned into the main thoroughfare, for the chase to begin once more.

"He must be dreadful hot, poor Jim!" thought Dorothea, pitying him in spite of herself for his false beard and heavy parcel, while she wiped away the drops already beginning to pour off her own forehead. The night was indeed close and sultry. A light, warm air, reeking like the steam from a cook-shop, breathed in her face, while a low roll of thunder, nearly lost in the noise of wheels,

growled and rumbled among the distant Surrey hills.

She followed him perseveringly through the more fashionable streets and squares of London, tolerably silent and deserted now in the interval between dinner and concert, ball, or drum. Here and there, through open windows, might be seen a few gentlemen at their wine, or a lady in evening dress coming out for a gasp of fresh air on the balcony overhead; but on the pavement below, a policeman under a lamp, or a lady's-maid hurrying on an errand, were the only occupants, and these took no heed of the bearded man with his parcel, nor of the dirty, gaudily-dressed woman who followed like his shadow. So they turned down Grosvenor Place and through Belgrave Square, into one of the adjoining streets. Here Jim, slackening pace, took his hat off, and wiped his brow. Dorothea, with all her faculties on the stretch, slipped into a portico at the very moment when he glanced round on every side to make sure he was not watched. From this

hiding-place she observed him, to her great astonishment, ring boldly at the door of a large, handsome house. That astonishment was increased to see him admitted without demur by an irreproachable footman, powder, plush, and all complete. Large drops of rain began to fall, and outside London, beyond the limits of our several gas companies, it lightened all round the horizon.

Dorothea crept nearer the house where Jim had disappeared. On the ground floor, in a dining-room of which the windows stood open for the heat, she saw his figure within a few yards of her. He was unpacking his bundle and arranging its contents on the table, where a servant had placed a lamp when he admitted this unusual visitor. The rain fell now in good earnest, and not a living creature remained in the street. Dorothea cowered down by the area-railings, and watched.

Not for long. The dining-room door opened, and into the lamplight, like a vision from some world of which poor Dorothea

could scarcely form the vaguest conception, came a pale, haughty woman, beautiful exceedingly, before whom Jim, her own Jim, usually so defiant, seemed to cower and tremble like a dog. Even in that moment of bewilderment Dorothea's eye, woman-like, marked the mode in which Miss Bruce's long black hair was twisted, and missed neither the cut nor texture of her garments.

Jim spread his goods out for inspection. It was obvious that he had gained admission to the house under the guise of a dealer in rare silks and Eastern brocades. We, who know everything, know that Mrs. Stanmore was dozing over her coffee upstairs, and that this scheme, too, originated in the fertile brain and determined character of her niece.

“I'll take that shawl, if you please,” said Maud, in her cool, authoritative way. “I dare say it's better than it looks. Put it aside for me. And—you were to ask your own price.”

Dorothea, drenched to the skin, felt, never-

theless, a fire burning within ; for, raising her face to peer above the area railings, she marked a mute worship in Jim's adoring eyes ; she marked the working of his features, pale, as it seemed, with some new and overpowering emotion. Could this be Gentleman Jim ? She had seen him asleep and awake, pleased and angry, drunk and sober, but she had never seen that face before. Through all its agony there rose in her heart a feeling of anger at such transparent folly—almost of contempt for such weakness in a man.

His voice came hoarse and thick, while he answered—

“Never name it, miss, never name it. I done as you desired, an' a precious awkward job it were ! *He'll tell no tales now !*” She started. The hand in which she held a small embroidered note-case trembled visibly ; but her voice, though low, was perfectly firm and clear.

“If you exceeded my order,” said she, “you have nothing to hope from my forbearance. I

shall be the first to have you punished. I told you so.”

He could scarcely contain his admiration. “What a plucked un!” he muttered; “what a plucked un! No, miss,” he added, “you needn’t fear. Fear, says I? You never feared nothink in your life. You needn’t think of that ’ere. Me and another party we worked it off as neat as wax, without noise and without violence. We’ve a-trapped him safe, miss, and you’ve got nothink to do but just you lift up your hand, and we’ll put him back, not a ha’porth the wuss, on the very spot as we took him from.”

She drew a great breath of relief, but suffered not a muscle of her countenance to betray her feelings. “It is better so,” she observed, quietly. “Remember, once for all, when I give orders they must be obeyed to the letter. I am satisfied with you, Jim—I think your name is Jim?”

There was just the least possible inflection of kindness in her voice, and this ruffian’s heart

leaped to meet it, while the tears came to his eyes. He dashed them savagely away, and took a letter from his breast-pocket.

“That’s all we found on him, miss,” said he, “that an’ a couple o’ cigars. He hadn’t no watch, no blunt, no latch-key, nor nothink. I kep’ this here careful to bring it you. Bless ye, I can read, I can, *well*, but I’ve not read that there. I couldn’t even smoke of his cigars. No, I guv ’em to a pal. This here job warn’t done for money, miss! It were done for—for—well—for *you!*”

She took the letter with as little emotion as if it had been an ordinary tradesman’s bill for a few shillings; yet had she once pawned a good many hundred pounds worth of diamonds only on the chance of recovering its contents.

“At least I must pay you for the shawl,” said she, pulling the notes out of their case.

“For the shawl, miss? Yes,” answered Jim. “Ten pounds will buy that, an’ leave a fair profit for my pal as owns it. Not a shilling more, miss—no—no. D’ye mind the first

time as ever I see you? D’ye mind what I said then? There’s one chap, miss, in this world as belongs of you, body and soul. He’s a poor chap, he is, and a rough chap, but he asks no better than to sarve of you, be the job what it may—ay, if he swings for it! Now it’s out!”

Over her pale, haughty face swept a flash of mingled triumph, malice, and even amusement, while she listened to this desperate man’s avowal of fidelity and belief. But she only vouchsafed him a cold, condescending smile, observing, as she selected a ten-pound note, “Is there nothing I can do to mark my satisfaction and approval?”

He fidgeted, glanced at the note-case, and began packing up his goods.

“If *you’re* pleased, miss, that’s enough. But if so be as you *could* do without that there empty bit of silk, and spare it me for a keepsake—well—miss—I’d never part with it—no—not if the rope was rove, and the nightcap drawed over my blessed face!”

She put the empty note-case in his hand. "You're a fool," she said, ringing the bell for a servant to show him out; "but you're a stanch one, and I wish there were more like you."

"Blast me! I *am*!" he muttered, adding, as he turned into the wet street, and walked on through the rain like a man in a dream, "if there was more such gals as you maybe there'd be more fools like me. It would be a rum world then, blessed if it wouldn't! And now it will be a whole week afore I shall see her again!"

Dorothea, clinging to the area-railings, even in the imminence of discovery had not the heart to leave them as he went out. Stupefied, bewildered, benumbed, she could scarcely believe in the reality of the scene she had witnessed. She felt it explained much that had lately puzzled her exceedingly; but at present she was unequal to the task of arranging her ideas so as to understand the mystery that enveloped her.

Gradually the thunderstorm rolled away, the rain cleared off, the moon shone out, and Dorothea reached her squalid home, drenched, cold, weary, and sick at heart.



CHAPTER II.

“WANTED—A LADY.”

WE must go back a few days to watch with Dick Stanmore, through the sad, sorrowing hours that succeeded his stepmother's ball. I trust I have not so described this gentleman as to leave an impression that he was what young ladies call a romantic person. Romance, like port wine, after-dinner slumbers, flannel next the skin, and such self-indulgences, should be reserved as a luxury for after-life; under no circumstances must it be permitted to impair the efficiency of manhood in its prime. Dick Stanmore took his punishment

with true British pluck and pertinacity. It was “a facer.” As it could not possibly be returned, his instincts prompted him to “grin and bear it.” He had sustained a severe fall. His first impulse was to get up again. None the less did nerves thrill, and brain spin, with the force and agony of the blow. Perhaps the very nature that most resists, suffers also the most severely from such shocks, as a granite wall cracks and splinters to the round shot, while an earth-work accepts that rushing missile with a stolid harmless thud.

Dick’s composition was at least not earthy enough to let him go to bed after this recent downfall of his hopes. Restless, hurt, sorrowful, angry with himself, not *her*—for his nature could be gallantly loyal under defeat—sleep was as impossible as any other occupation requiring quietude and self-control. No. The only thing to be done was to smoke, of course! and then to pack up everything he could lay hands on, without delay, so as to leave London that very morning, for any part of England, Europe,

or the habitable world. All places would be alike to him now, only the farther from Belgrave Square the better. Therefore it was, perhaps, that, after shamming to breakfast, and enduring considerable pain, in a state of enforced inactivity, while his servant completed their travelling arrangements, he drove through this very square, though it lay by no means in a direct line for the railway station to which he was bound. Those who believe in ghosts affirm that a disembodied spirit haunts the place it best loved on earth; and what are we but the ghosts of our former selves, when all that constituted the pith and colouring and vitality of our lives has passed away? Ah! Lady Macbeth's are not the only white hands from which that cruel stain can never be removed. There are soft eyes and sweet smiles and gentle whispers enough in the world guilty of moral manslaughter (I believe the culprits themselves call it "justifiable homicide"), not entirely divested of that malice prepense which constitutes the crime of murder! Happy the

victims in whom life is not completely extinguished, who recover their feet, bind up their wounds, and undeterred by a ghastly experience, hazard in more encounters a fresh assassination of the heart. Such fortitude would have afforded a remedy to Dick Stanmore. “Wanted—a lady!” should have been the motto emblazoned on his banner if ever he turned back into the battle once more. Homœopathy, no doubt, is the treatment for a malady like that which prostrated this hapless sufferer, — homœopathy, at first distrusted, ridiculed, accepted only under protest, and in accordance with the force of circumstances, the exigencies of the position; gradually found to soothe, to revive, to ameliorate, till at last it effects a perfect and triumphant cure, nay even shows itself powerful enough to produce a second attack of the same nature, fierce and virulent as the first. But, meanwhile, Dick Stanmore followed the ghost’s example, and drove sadly through Belgrave Square, as he told himself, for the last—last time! Had he

been an hour later, just one hour, he might have taken away with him a subject for considerable speculation, during his proposed travels in search of distraction. This is what he would have seen.

A good-looking, bad-looking man, with dark eyes and hair sweeping a crossing very inefficiently, while he watched the adjacent street with an air of eager anxiety, foreign to an occupation which indeed seems to demand unusual philosophy and composure of mind. Presently, Maud Bruce, tripping daintily across the path he had swept clean, let herself into the square gardens, dropping her glove in the muddy street as she took a pass-key from her pocket. The crossing-sweeper pounced at it like a hawk, stuck his broom against a lamp-post, and hurried round to the other side of the square.

Here Maud appeared at the gate, while "Gentleman Jim," for it was none other, returned her glove without a word through the iron bars.

“I hardly expected you so soon,” said Miss Bruce. “My letter could only have been posted at five this morning.”

“You might ha’ made sure I’d come that instant, Miss,” answered Jim, his face brightening with excitement and delight. “I knowed who ’twas from, well enough, though ’twas but a line as a man might say. I aint had it an hour, an’ here I am ready an’ willin’ for your job, be it what it may!”

“You’re a bold fellow I know,” said Maud, “but it’s a desperate undertaking. If you don’t like it say so.”

Jim swore a horrible oath, and then drew his hand across his lips as though to wipe away its traces. “Look’ee here, miss,” he muttered, in a hoarse thick whisper. “If you says to me, Jim, says you, go and rob that there church—see now, I’d have the wards of the big key, in wax, ah! this weary arternoon. If you says to me, says you, Jim, go and cut that there parson’s throat, I’ve got a old knife in my pocket, as I wouldn’t want to sharpen afore

the job was done, and the parson, too, for good an' all!"

There was a peculiar grace in the setting on of Maud's head, especially in the firm lines of her mouth and chin. Though she looked even paler than usual, her rare beauty, always somewhat resolute and defiant in character, never showed to greater advantage than now.

"I won't speak of reward to *you*," she said, very clearly and distinctly, "though you shall name your own price and be paid at your own time. Listen—I have an enemy—a bitter enemy who threatened me—actually dared to threaten *me* last night—who would hesitate at nothing to do me an injury."

"Blast him!" muttered Jim, ferociously. "Leave un to me, miss—leave un to me!"

She took no heed of his interruption. "That enemy"—she continued—"must be got out of my way."

The sweat stood on her listener's brow. "I understand you, miss," he gasped in a broken voice. "It shall be done."

Over the face this ruffian thought too beautiful to be mortal came a stern proud smile.

“I forbid *that*,” she replied. “Forbid it distinctly, and I *will* be obeyed to the very letter. If you were to kill this man, I should be the first to hand you over to justice. Listen. He must be kept quiet and out of the way for something less than three weeks. After that, he can harm me no more,—I bear him no grudge, I wish him no evil—but he must be taken away this very afternoon. Every hour might make it too late. Can you do this?”

Jim pondered. He was an experienced criminal. A man with certain qualities, which, in the honest paths of life, might have made him successful, even remarkable. In a few seconds he had run over his chances, his resources, his risk of detection, all the pros and cons of the undertaking. He looked cheerfully in her face.

“I *can*, miss,” said he, confidently. “I

don't go for to say as it's a job to be done right off, like easy shavin' or taking a dozen of hiseters. But it's to be worked. I'll engage for that, and I'm the chap as can work it. You couldn't give me no longer than to-day, could ye now?"

"If it's not done at once, you must let it alone," was the answer.

"Now that's business," replied Jim, growing cooler and more self-possessed as he reviewed the difficulties of his enterprise. "The party being in town, miss, o'course. You may depend on my makin' of him safe before nine o'clock to-night. Shall I trouble you for the name and address, or will you give me a description in full, that will do as well?"

"You have seen him," she observed, quietly. "On this very spot, where I am standing now. I walked with him in these gardens the first morning you swept our crossing. A gentleman in a frock coat with a bunch of flowers at his buttonhole. Do you remember?"

Did he remember? Why the man's figure,

features, every detail of his dress was photographed on Jim's heart.

“No need to tell me his name, miss,” was the answer. “I knows him as well as I knows these here old shoes o' mine. I've had my eye on him ever since. I can tell you when he goes out, when he comes in, where he takes his meals. I could lay my hand on him in any part of this here town at two hours' notice. Make yourself easy, miss. Your job's as good as done, and some day you'll see me again, miss, won't you? And—and you'll thank me kindly, perhaps, when it's off your mind for good and all!”

“You shall come and tell me the particulars,” answered Miss Bruce, with a gracious smile that seemed to flood him in sunshine, “when the thing is finished. And now I ought to be at home again, but before I go, understand plainly, to-morrow will be too late!”

Jim was deep in thought. “The bird might be shy, miss,” said he after a pause. “Some on em's easy scared, an' this doesn't seem like a

green one, not a bit of it. Supposin' as he *won't* be 'ticed, miss. There's only one way, then!"

For a moment she felt a keen stab of compunction, but remembering the stake she ventured, nerved herself to resist the pang. This was no time for child's play, for a morbid sensitiveness, for weak indulgence of the feelings.

"Tell him you have a message from *me*, from Miss Bruce," she replied, firmly. "It will lead him anywhere."

Jim looked as if he would rather set about the business in any other way; nevertheless, he was keenly alive to the efficiency of so tempting a bait, reflecting, at the same time, with a kind of awe on Mr. Ryfe's temerity in affronting such a character as this.

Another hurried sentence. A light in Jim's eyes, like that with which a dog receives directions from its master—a gesture such as dismisses the same dog imperiously to its kennel, and Miss Bruce walked quietly home

to her music and her embroidery, while the crossing-sweeper, recovering his broom, hurried off in another direction to commence operations against the unsuspecting Tom Ryfe.

That gentleman's feelings, as he sat in his uncle's office, the morning after Mrs. Stanmore's ball, were of no enviable nature. Malice, hatred, and all uncharitableness might indeed sufficiently describe the frame of mind in which he went about his daily business, unfortunately on the present occasion, an affair of such mere routine as in no way to distract his attention from his sorrows and his wrongs.

“She has dared me,” thought he, poring over a deed he knew by heart, and of which his eye only took in the form and outward semblance—“challenged me to do my worst, and herself declared it is to be war to the knife. Oh! Maud, Maud,—how could you?—how could you? Was it not enough to have wound yourself round my heart—to have identified yourself with my hopes, my ambition, my manhood, my very existence, and then with

one turn of your hand to have destroyed them, each and all, but you must add insult to injury—must scorn and trample on me as well? Some men may stand this sort of treatment—I won't. I *have* a pull over you. Ah! I'm not such a fool, after all, perhaps, as you thought! I have it, and hang me, but I'll make use of it! You have blasted my life, and thought it good fun, no doubt. I'll see if I can't give tit-for-tat, and spoil *your* little game, my haughty lady, with your white face and your cursed high-handed airs. Yet, how I loved them—how I loved them! Must I never see a woman again without that queenly beauty coming between me and my share of happiness? What right had you to destroy my whole future? And I would have been so different if you had cared for me. I might have made a better gentleman than any of them. As for that empty-headed cousin (to be sure you've thrown him over, too, and I hope he feels it to his marrow), and that swaggering lord, can they care for you like I did? Would they have

worked as hard to please you, and sat up night after night, as I have done, poring over papers to see you righted?—and why am I to be sacrificed to such men as these? I won't be sacrificed! No—by Heavens! I've done my best for you hitherto, Miss Bruce, and you've dared me now to do my *worst*. I shall rather astonish you, I think, when you learn what that worst is. Curse you! I'll have no mercy. If I *am* to suffer, I'll take care not to suffer meekly and alone. It's *my* turn now, my lady, as, before twelve hours are out, you shall know to your cost.”

Mr. Ryfe, you see, was sadly wanting in that first element of chivalry, which establishes the maxim that “a woman can do no wrong.” This principle, when acted up to in its fullest sense, is convenient, no doubt, and beneficial to us all. It involves free trade on the broadest basis, sweeping away much of the selfishness and morbid sentimentality that constitute the superstition we call Love. *She* has a perfect right to change her mind—bless her! why

shouldn't she? And so, no doubt, have *you*! Ring for fresh cards, cut again for partners, and so sit merrily down to another rubber. Thus, too, you will learn to play the game cautiously and with counters, saving both your temper and your gold. It may be you will miss the excitement of real gambling, finding the pastime so wearisome that you are fain to leave off, and go to bed. Whatever you do, retire with a good grace. It is but a choice of evils. Perhaps you had better be bored than miserable, and if less exciting, it is surely less painful, to stifle listless yawns, than to crush down the cry of a wilful, wounded heart.

Mr. Ryfe, however, I consider perfectly inexcusable in the course he chose to adopt. Self-sacrifice is, of all others, the quality by which, in questions of feeling, the true gold is to be distinguished from the false. But Tom had no idea of such generous immolation—not he.

Hour after hour, poring over the deeds of

which he never read a line, he raged and chafed and came to a determination at last.

He had thought of writing to Lord Bearwarden, in his own name, warning him, as a true friend, of the lady's antecedents who was about to become his lordship's bride, enclosing, at the same time, a copy of her promise to himself; for, with professional caution, he reflected that the original had better not pass out of his hands. Then, he argued, if his lordship could only see with his own eyes the treasured lines in her well-known handwriting, by which Miss Bruce had bound herself in all honour to the lawyer's clerk, that nobleman must readily, and of necessity, hold himself absolved from any engagement he might have contracted with her, and perceive at once the folly and impropriety of making such a woman his wife. Yes—Lord Bearwarden should read the letter itself. He would obtain a personal interview that very evening, when the latter dressed for dinner. There would thus be no necessity for trusting the important document

out of his own possession, while at the same time he could himself adopt a tone of candour and high feeling, calculated to make a strong impression on such a true gentleman as his friend.

He took Miss Bruce's promise from the safe in which he kept it locked up, and hid it carefully in his breast-pocket. Then, looking at his watch, and finding it was time to leave his office for the West-end, heaped his papers together, bundled them into the safe, and prepared to depart.

Walking moodily down stairs, he was way-laid by Dorothea, who, sluicing the steps with dirty water under pretence of cleaning them, thus held, as it were, the key of the position, and so had him at command. It surprised him not a little that she should desist from her occupation to request an interview.

“Can I speak to you for a moment, Mr. Thomas?” said she. “It's private, and it's particular.”

The amount of pressure put on Dorothea

ere she consented to the job now in hand it is not for me to estimate. Her Jim was a man of unscrupulous habits and desperate resources. It is probable that she had been subjected to the influences of affection, sentiment, and intimidation, perhaps, even physical force. I cannot tell, my business is only with results.

There was no escaping, even had Mr. Ryfe been so inclined, for Dorothea's person, pail, and scrubbing-brushes defended the whole width of the staircase.

“It's strange, Mr. Thomas,” she continued, pushing the hair off her face. “Lor! I was that frightened and that surprised, as you might have 'eard my 'eart beatin' like carpets. Who she may be, an' wot she may be, I know no more than the dead. But her words was these—I'm tellin' you her werry words—If you can make sure of seeing Mr. Ryfe, says she, that's *you*, Mr. Thomas, any time afore to-night, says she, tell him, as I must have a word with him in priwate atween him and me this werry evening, or it would have been better for both

of us, poor things, says she, if we'd 'a never been born!"

Tom Ryfe stared.

"What do you mean?" he said. "Am I to understand that the—the lady who spoke to you was desirous of an interview with me here in chambers, or where?"

"An' a born lady she is an' were!" answered Dorothea, incoherent, and therefore in the acute lawyer's opinion more likely to be telling the truth. "A beautiful lady, too, tall, and pale, 'aughty and 'andsome—(Tom started)—dressed in 'alf-mourning, with a black-and-white parasol in her 'and. It's to see you private, Mr. Thomas, as she bade me to warn of you. To-night at height in the Birdcage Walk, without fail, says she, for it's life and death, as is the matter, or marriage, says she, which is sometimes wuss nor both."

Dorothea then removed herself, her pail, and her scrubbing-brushes to one side, as though inviting him to follow out his assignation without delay.

“I ask yer pardon,” said she, “Mr. Thomas, if I done wrong. But the young lady she seemed so anxious and aggrawated-like. No offence, sir, I ’umbly ’ope, and she guv’ me ’alf a sovereign.”

“And I’ll give you another,” exclaimed Tom, placing a coin of that value in Dorothea’s damp hot hand. “The Birdcage Walk, at eight. And it’s past six now. Thank you, Dorothea. I’ve no doubt it’s all right. I’ll start at once.”

Leaving Gray’s Inn, the warm tears filled his eyes to think he had so misjudged her. Evidently she was in some difficulty, some complication; she had no opportunity of confiding to him, and hence her apparent heartlessness, the inconsistency of her conduct which he had been unable to understand. Obviously she loved him still, and the conviction filled him with rapture, all the more thrilling and intense for his late misgivings.

He pulled her written promise from his pocket, and kissed it passionately, reading it

over and over again in the fading light. A prayer rose from heart to lip for the woman he loved, while he looked up to the crimson glories of the western sky. Do such prayers fall back in the form of curses on the heads of those who betray, haunting them in their sorrows—at their need—worst of all in their supreme moments of happiness and joy? God forbid! Rather let us believe that, true to their heaven-born nature, they are blessings for those who give and those who receive.

Some two hours later, Tom Ryfe found himself pacing to and fro, under the trees in the Birdcage Walk, with a happier heart, though it beat so fast, than had been within his waistcoat for weeks.

It was getting very dark, and even beneath the gas-lamps it was difficult to distinguish the figure of man or woman, flitting through the deep shadows cast by trees still thick with their summer foliage. Tom, peering anxiously into the obscure, could make out nothing but a policeman, a foot-guardsman with a clothes-

basket, and a drunken slattern carrying her baby upside-down.

He was growing anxious. Big Ben's booming tones had already warned him it was a quarter-past eight, when, suddenly, so close to him he could almost touch it, loomed the figure of a woman.

“Miss Bruce,” he exclaimed—“Maud—is it you?”

Turning his own body, so as to take advantage of a dim ray from the nearest gaslight, he was aware that the woman, shorter and stouter than Miss Bruce, had muffled herself in a cloak, and was closely veiled.

“You have a letter—a message,” he continued in a whisper. “It's all right. I'm the party you expected to meet—here—at eight—under the trees.”

“And wot the —— are you at with my missus under the trees?” growled a brutal voice over his shoulder, while Tom felt he was helplessly pinioned by a pair of strong arms from behind, that crushed and bruised him like

iron. Ere he could twist his hands free to show fight, which he meant to do pretty fiercely, he found himself baffled, blinded, suffocated, by a handkerchief thrust into his face, while a strong, pungent, yet not altogether unpleasant flavour of ether filled eyes, mouth, and nostrils, till it permeated to his very lungs. Then with every pulsation of the blood Big Ben seemed to be striking inside his brain, till something gave way with a great whizz! like the mainspring of a watch, and Tom Ryfe was perfectly quiet and comfortable henceforth.

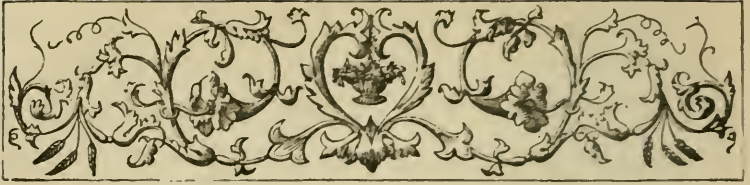
Five minutes afterwards a belated bricklayer lounging home with his mate observed two persons, man and woman, supporting between them a limp, helpless figure, obviously incapable of sense or motion. Said the bricklayer, "That's a stiff-un, Bill, to all appearance."

"Stiff-un be d—d!" retorted Bill; "he's only jolly drunk. I wish I was, too!"

The bricklayer seemed a man of reflection; for half a mile or so he held his peace, then,

with a backward nod of the head, to indicate his meaning, observed solemnly—

“ I wouldn’t take that chap’s head-ache when he comes to, no, not to be as jolly drunk as he is this minnit—I wouldn’t !”



CHAPTER III.

“ THE COMING QUEEN.”

“ And whenever she comes she will find me waiting
To do her homage—my queen—my queen !”

HOW many an aspiring heart has breathed the high, chivalrous sentiment, never before so touchingly expressed, as in the words of this beautiful song? How many a gallant, generous nature has desired with unspeakable longing to lay its wealth of loyalty and devotion at her feet who is to prove the coming queen of its affections, the ladye of its love? And for how many is the unwavering worship, the unfailing faith, the venture of wealth and honour, the risk of life and limb, right royally rewarded according to its merits and its claim?

I am not sure that implicit belief, unquestioning obedience, are the qualities most esteemed by those illustrious personages on whom they are lavished; and I think that the rebel who sends in his adhesion on his own terms is sometimes treated with more courtesy and consideration than the stanch vassal whose fidelity remains unaffected by coldness, ingratitude, or neglect.

Dick Stanmore, reading in the “Morning Post” an eloquent account of Viscount Bearwarden’s marriage to Miss Bruce, with the festivities consequent thereon, felt that he had sadly wasted his loyalty, if indeed this lady were the real sovereign to whom the homage of his heart was due. He began now to entertain certain misgivings on that score. What if he had over-estimated his own admiration and the force of her attractions? Perhaps his *real* queen had not come to him after all. It might be she was advancing even now in her maiden majesty, as yet unseen, but shedding before her a soft and mellow radiance, a tender

quiver of light and warmth, like that which flushes the horizon at the break of a summer's day.

His dark hour had been cold and dismal enough. There is nothing to be ashamed of in the confession. Dick suffered severely, as every manly nature must suffer when deceived by a woman. He did not blame the woman—why should he? but he felt that a calamity had befallen him, the heaviest of his young experience, and he bore it as best he might.

“*Cælum non animum*” is a very old proverb: his first impulse, no doubt, was to change the scene, and seek under other skies an altered frame of mind, in defiance of Horace and his worldly wisdom, so rarely at fault. In these days a code of behaviour has been established by society to meet every eventuality of life. When your fortunes are impaired you winter at Rome; when your liver is affected you travel in Germany; when your heart is broke you start at once for India. There is something unspeakably soothing, I imagine, in

the swing of an elephant as he crashes through jungle, beating it out for tigers; something consolatory to wounded feelings in the grin of a heavy old tusker, lumbering along, half sulky, half defiant, winking a little blood-red eye at the pig-sticker, pushing his Arab to speed with a loose rein ere he delivers the meditated thrust that shall win first spear. Snipe, too, killed by the despairing lover while standing in a paddy-field up to his knees in water, with a tropical sun beating on his head, to be eaten afterwards in military society, not undiluted by pale ale and brandy-pawnee, afford a relief to the finer feelings of his nature as delightful as it is unaccountable; while those more adventurous spirits who, penetrating far into the mountainous regions of the north-west frontier, persecute the wild sheep or the eland, and even make acquaintance with the lordly ibex "rocketing" down from crag to crag, breaking the force and impetus of his leap by alighting on horns and forehead, would seem to gain in their life of

hardship and adventure an immunity from the "common evil" which lasts them well into middle age.

Dick Stanmore's first impulse, therefore, was to secure a berth in the P. and O. steamer at once. Then he reflected that it would not be a bad plan to stop at Constantinople—one of the Egean islands, Messina—or, indeed, why go farther than Marseilles? If you come to that, Paris was the very place for a short visit. A man might spend a fortnight there pleasantly enough, even in the hot weather, and it would be a complete change, the eventual result of these deliberations being a resolve to go down and look after his landed property in the West of England. I believe that in this determination Mr. Stanmore showed more wisdom than his friends had hitherto given him credit for possessing. At his own place he had his own affairs to interest him, a good deal of business to attend to, above all, constant opportunities of doing good. This it is, I fancy, which constitutes the real pith and enjoyment of a

country gentleman's life—which imparts zest and flavour to the marking of trees, the setting of trimmers, the shooting of partridges, nay, even to the joyous excitement of fox-hunting itself.

This, too, is a wondrous salve for such wounds as those under which Dick Stanmore was now smarting. The very comparison of our own sorrows with those of others has a tendency to decrease their proportions and diminish their importance. How can I prate of my cut finger in presence of your broken leg? and how utterly ridiculous would have seemed Mr. Stanmore's sentimental sorrows to one of his own labourers keeping a wife and half a dozen children on eleven shillings a week?

In the whole moral physic-shop there is no anodyne like duty, sweetened with a little charity towards your neighbours. Amusement and dissipation simply aggravate the evil. Personal danger, while its excitement braces nerve and intellect for the time, is an over-

powerful stimulant for the imagination, and leaves a reaction sadly softening to the heart. Successful ambition, gratified vanity, what are these with none to share the triumph? But put the sufferer through a steady course of daily duties, engrossing in their nature, stupefying in the monotony of their routine, and insensibly, while his attention is distracted from Self and selfish feelings, he gathers strength, day by day, till at last he is able to look his sorrow in the face, and fight it fairly, as he would any other honourable foe. The worst is over then, and victory a mere question of time.

So Dick Stanmore, setting to work with a will, found sleep and appetite and bodily strength come back rapidly enough. He had moments of pain, no doubt, particularly when he woke in the morning. Also at intervals during the day, when the breeze sighed through his woods, or the sweetbriar's fragrance stole on his senses more heavily than usual. Once, when a gipsy-girl blessed his handsome face, adding, in the fervour of her

gratitude, a thousand good wishes for “the lass he loved, as must love him dear, sure-lie!”—but for very shame he could have cried like a child.

Such relapses, however, were of rarer occurrence every week. It was not long before he told himself that he had been through the worst of his ordeal and could meet Lady Bearwarden now without looking like a fool. In this more rational frame of mind Mr. Stanmore arrived in London on business at that period of settled weather and comparative stagnation called by tradesmen the “dead time of year,” and found his late-acquired philosophy put somewhat unexpectedly to the proof.

He was staring at a shop-window in Oxford Street, studying, indeed, the print of a patent mowing-machine, but thinking, I fear, more of past scenes in certain well-lit rooms, on slippery floors, than of the velvet lawns at home, when a barouche drew up to the kerbstone with such trampling of hoofs, such pulling about of horses’ mouths, such a jerk

and vibration of the whole concern, as denoted a smart carriage with considerable pretension, a body-coachman of no ordinary calibre. Dick turned sharply round, and there, not five yards off, was the pale face, proud, dreamy, and beautiful as of old. Had she seen him? He hardly knew, for he was sick at heart, growing white to his very lips—he, a strong healthy man, with as much courage as his neighbours. Horribly ashamed of himself he felt. And well he might be! but with more wisdom than he had hitherto shown, he made a snatch at his hat, and took refuge in immediate retreat.

It was his only chance. How, indeed, could he have met her manfully and with dignity, while every nerve and fibre quivered at her presence? how endure the shame of betraying in his manner that he loved her very dearly still? It gave him, indeed, a sharp and cruel pang, to think that it had come to this—that the face he had so worshipped he must now fly from like a culprit—that for his own sake,

in sheer self-defence, he must avoid her presence, as if he had committed against her some deadly injury—against *her*, for whom, even now, he would willingly have laid down his life! Poor Dick! he little knew, but it was the last pang he was destined to feel from his untoward attachment, and it punished him far more severely than he deserved.

Blundering hastily up a by-street, he ran into the very arms of a gentleman who had turned aside to apply a latch-key at the door of a rambling, unfurnished-looking house, sadly in want of paint, whitewash, and general repair. The gentleman, with an exclamation of delight, put both hands on Mr. Stanmore's shoulders.

“This *is* a piece of luck!” exclaimed the latter. “Why, it's ‘old Sir Simon the King!’”

His mind reverted insensibly to the pleasant Oxford days, and he used a nickname universally bestowed on his friend by the men of his college.

“And what can *you* be doing here at this time of year?” asked Simon. “In the first place, how came you to be in London? In the second, how did you ever get so far along Oxford Street? In the third, being here, won’t you come up to the painting-room? I’ll show you my sketches; I’ll give you some ’baccy—I haven’t forgot Iffley Lock and your vile habit of stopping to drink. I can even supply you with beer! We’ll have a smoke, and a talk over old times.”

“Willingly,” answered Dick, declining the beer, however, on the plea that such potations only went well with boating or cricket, and followed the painter upstairs into an exceedingly uncomfortable room, of which the principal object of furniture seemed to be an easel, bearing a sketch, apparently to be transferred hereafter into some unfinished picture.

Dick was in no frame of mind to converse upon his own affairs; accepting the proffered cigar, and taking the only seat in the place, he preferred listening to his friend, who got to

work at once, and talked disjointedly while he painted.

“I can’t complain,” said Simon, in answer to the other’s questions concerning his prosperity and success. “I was always a plodding sort of fellow, as you remember. Not a genius—I don’t *think* I’ve the divine gift. Sometimes I hope it may come. I’ve worked hard, I grant you—very hard, but I’ve had extraordinary luck — marvellous! What do you think of that imp’s tail?—Isn’t it a trifle too long?”

“I’m no judge of imps,” answered Dick. “He’s horribly ugly. Go on about yourself.”

“Well, as I was saying,” continued Simon, foreshortening his imp the while, “my luck has been wonderful. It all began with *you*. If you hadn’t gone fishing there, I should never have seen Norway. If I hadn’t seen it I couldn’t have painted it.”

“I’m not sure that follows,” interrupted Dick.

“Well, I *shouldn’t* have painted it, then,”

resumed the artist. "And the credit I got for those Norway sketches was perfectly absurd. I see their faults now. They're cold, and crude, and one or two are quite contrary to the first principles of art. I should like to paint them all over again. But still, if I hadn't been to Norway, I shouldn't be here now."

"No more should I," observed Dick, puffing out a volume of smoke. "I should have been 'marry-ed to a mermy-ed' by this time, if you had shown a proper devotion to your art, and the customary indifference to your friend."

"Oh! that was nothing," said the painter, blushing. "Any other fellow could have pulled you out just as well. I say, Stanmore, how jolly it was over there! Those were happy days. And yet I don't wish to have them back again—do you?"

Dick sighed and held his peace. For him it seemed that the light heart and joyous carelessness of that bright youthful time was gone, never to come again.

“I have learned so much since then,” continued Simon, putting a little grey into his imp’s muzzle, “and unlearned so much, too, which is better still. Mannerism, Stanmore—mannerism is the great enemy of art. Now I’ll explain what I mean in two words. In the first place, you observe the light from that chink streaming down on my imp’s back—well, in the picture, you know——”

“Where *is* the picture?” exclaimed Dick, whose cigar was finished, and who had no scruples in thus unceremoniously interrupting a professional lecture which previous experience told him might be wearisome. “Let’s see it. Let’s see *all* the pictures. Illustration’s better than argument, and I can’t understand anything unless it’s set before me in bright colours, under my very nose.”

Good-natured Simon desisted from his occupation at once, and began lifting picture after picture, as they stood in layers against the wall, to place them in a favourable light for the inspection of his friend. Many and dis-

cursive were his criticisms on these, the progressive results of eye, and hand, and brain, improving every day. Here the drawing was faulty, there the tints were coarse. This betrayed mannerism that lacked power, and in a very ambitious landscape enriched with wood, water, and mountain, a patchy sky spoiled the effect of the whole.

Nevertheless it seemed that he was himself not entirely dissatisfied with his work, and whenever his friend ventured on the diffident criticism of an amateur, Simon demonstrated at great length that each fault, as he pointed it out, was in truth a singular merit and beauty in the picture.

Presently, with a face of increased importance, he moved a large oblong canvas from its hiding-place, to prop it artistically at such an angle as showed the lights and shades of its finished portion to the best advantage. Then he fell back a couple of paces, contemplating it in silence with his head on one side and so waited for his friend's opinion.

But Dick was mute. Something in this picture woke up the pain of a recent wound festering in his heart, and yet through all the smart and tingling, came a strange sensation of relief, like that with which a styptic salves a sore.

“What do you think of it?” asked the artist. “I want your candid opinion, Stanmore—impartial—unprejudiced—I tell you. I hope great things from it. I believe it far and away the best I’ve painted yet. Look into the work. Oh! it will stand inspection. You might examine it with a microscope. Then, the conception, eh? And the drawing’s not amiss. A little more this way. You catch the outline of his eyebrow, with the turn of the Rhymer’s head.”

“Hang the Rhymer’s head!” replied Dick, “I don’t care about it. I won’t look at it. I *can’t* look at it, man, with such a woman as *that* in the picture. Old boy! you’ve won immortality at last!”

But Simon’s face fell. “That’s a great

fault," he answered, gravely. "The details, though kept down as accessories to the whole, should yet be worked out so carefully as to possess individual merit of their own. I see though. I see how to remedy the defect you have suggested. I can easily bring him out by darkening the shadows of the background. Then, this fairy at his elbow is paltry, and too near him besides. I shall paint her out altogether. She takes the eye off my principal figures, and breaks that grand line of light pouring in from the morning sky. Don't you think so?"

But Dick gave no answer. With feverish thirst and longing, he was drinking in the beauty of the Fairy Queen. And had not Simon Perkins been the dullest of observers, and the least conceited of painters, he must have felt intensely flattered by the effect of his work.

"So you like her," said he, after a pause, during which, in truth, he had been considering whether he should not paint out the intrusive fairy that very afternoon.

“Like her!” replied the other. “It’s the image of the most beautiful face I ever saw in my life. Only it’s softer—and even more beautiful. I’ll tell you what, old fellow, put a price on that picture, and I’ll have it, cost what it may! Only you must give me a little time,” added Dick, somewhat ruefully, reflecting that he had spent a good deal of money lately, and rent-day was still a long way off.

Simon smiled. “I wonder what you’d think of the original,” said he. “The model who sits to me for my Fairy Queen? I can tell you that face on the canvas is no more to be compared to hers than I am to Velasquez. And yet — Velasquez must have been a beginner once.”

“I don’t believe there’s such a woman—two such women in London,” replied his friend, correcting himself. “I can hardly imagine such eyes, such an expression. It’s what the fellows who write poetry call ‘the beauty of a dream,’ and I’ll never say poetry is nonsense again. No, that’s neither more nor less than

an imaginary angel, Simon. Simply—an impossible duck!”

“Would you like to see her?” asked the painter, laughing. “She’ll be here in five minutes. I do believe that’s her step on the stairs now.”

A strange, wild hope thrilled through Dick Stanmore’s heart. Could it be possible that Lady Bearwarden had employed his friend to paint her likeness in this fancy picture, perhaps under a feigned name, and was she coming to take her sitting now?

All his stoicism, all his philosophy, vanished on the instant. He would remain where he was though he should die for it. Oh! to see her—to be in the same room with her—to look in her eyes, and hear her voice once more!

A gown rustled. A light step was heard—the door opened, and a sweet laughing voice rung out its greeting to the painter, from the threshold.

“So late, Simon! Shameful, isn’t it? But

I’ve got all they wanted. Such bargains! I suppose nobody ever did so much shopping in so short a——”

She caught sight of Dick—stopped—blushed—and made a very fascinating little curtsey as they were formally introduced, but next time she spoke the merriment had gone out of her voice. It had become more staid, more formal, and its deeper, fuller tones reminded him painfully of Maud.

Yes. Had he not known Lady Bearwarden so well, he thought it would have been quite possible for him to have mistaken this beautiful young lady for that faithless peeress. The likeness was extraordinary! ridiculous! Not that he felt the least inclined to laugh—the features were absolutely the same, and a certain backward gesture of the head, a certain trick of the mouth and chin were identical with the manner of Lady Bearwarden, in those merry days that seemed so long ago now, when she had been Maud Bruce. Only Miss Algernon’s face had a softness, a kindly trustful expression,

he never remembered on the other; and her large pleading eyes seemed as if they could neither kindle with anger nor harden to freezing glances of scorn.

As for the Fairy Queen, he looked from the picture to its original, and felt constrained to admit that, wondrously beautiful as he had thought its likeness on canvas, the face before him was infinitely superior to the painter's fairest and most cherished work.

Dick went away of course almost immediately, though sorely against his will. Contrary to her wont, Miss Algernon, who was rather a mimic, and full of fun, neither imitated the gestures nor ridiculed the bearing of this chance visitor. "She had not observed him much," she said, when taxed by Simon with this unusual forbearance. This was false. But "she might know him again, perhaps, if they met." This, I imagine, was true!

And Dick, wending his way back to his hotel, buried in thought, passed, without recognising it, the spot where he met Lady

Bearwarden one short hour ago. He was pondering, no doubt, on the face he had just seen—on its truth, its purity, its fresh innocent mirth, its dazzling beauty, more perhaps than on its extraordinary likeness to hers who had brought him the one great misfortune of his life.



CHAPTER IV.

AN INCUBUS.

IT is not to be supposed that any gentleman can see a lady in the streets of London and remain himself unseen. In the human, as in meaner races, the female organ of perception is quicker, keener, and more accurate than the male. Therefore it is that a man bowing in Pall Mall or Piccadilly to some divinity in an open carriage, and failing to receive any return for his salute, sinks at once into a false position of awkwardness and discomfiture. *Il a manqué son coup*, and his face assumes incontinently the expression of one who has missed a woodcock in the open, and has no second barrel

with which to redeem his shot. As Dick saw Lady Bearwarden in Oxford Street, we may be sure that Lady Bearwarden also saw Dick; nor was her ladyship best pleased with the activity he displayed in avoiding her carriage and escaping from her society. If Mr. Stanmore had been the most successful Lovelace who ever devoted himself to the least remunerative of pursuits, instead of a loyal, kindhearted, unassuming gentleman, he could hardly have chosen a line of conduct so calculated to keep alive some spark of interest in Maud's breast, as that which he unconsciously adopted. It is one thing to dismiss a lover, because suited with a superior article (as some ladies send away five-foot-ten of footman when six-foot comes to look after the place), and another to lose a vassal for good, like an unreclaimed hawk, heedless of the lure, clear of the jesses, and checking, perhaps, at every kind of prey in wilful, wanton flight, down-wind towards the sea.

There is but one chance for a man worsted

in these duels *à l'outrance*, which are fought out with such merciless animosity. It is to bind up his wounds as best he may, and take himself off to die or get well in secret. Presently the conqueror finds that a battle only has been won, and not a territory gained. After the flush of combat comes a reaction, the triumph seems somewhat tame, ungraced by presence of the captive. Curiosity wakes up, pity puts in its pleading word, a certain jealous instinct of appropriation is aroused. Where is he? What has become of him? I wonder if he ever thinks of me *now*? Poor fellow! I shouldn't wish to be forgotten altogether, as if we had never met, and though I didn't want him to like *me*, I never meant that he was to care for anybody else! Such are the thoughts that chase each other through the female heart when deprived of sovereignty in the remotest particular; and it was very much in this way that Lady Bearwarden, sitting alone in her boudoir, speculated on the present doings and sentiments of the man who had

loved her so well and had given her up so unwillingly, yet with never a word of reproach, never a look nor action that could add to her remorse, or make her task more painful.

Alas! she was not happy; even now, when she had gained all she most wished and schemed for in the world. She felt she was not happy, and she felt, too, that for Dick to know of her unhappiness would be the bitterest drop in the bitter cup he had been compelled to drain.

As she looked round her beautiful boudoir with its blue satin hangings, its numerous mirrors, its redundancy of coronets, surmounting her own cipher, twisted and twined into a far more graceful decoration than the grim, heraldic Bruin which formed her husband's cognizance, she said to herself that something was yet required to constitute a woman's happiness beyond the utmost efforts of the upholster's art—that even carriages, horses, tall footmen, quantities of flowers, unlimited credit, and whole packs of cards left on the hall table every day, were mere accessories and super-

fluties, not the real pith and substance of that for which she pined.

Lady Bearwarden, more than most women, had, since her marriage, found the worldly ball at her foot. She needed but to kick it where she would. As Miss Bruce, with nothing to depend on but her own good looks and conquering manners, she had wrested a large share of admiration from an unwilling public; now as a peeress, and a rich one, the same public of both sexes courted, toadied, and flattered her, till she grew tired of hearing herself praised. The men, at least those of high position and great prospects, had no scruple in offering a married woman that homage which might have entailed their own domestic subjugation, if laid at a spinster's feet; and the women, all except the very smartest ladies (who liked her for her utter fearlessness and sang-froid, as well as for her own sake), thought it a fine thing to be on intimate terms with "Maud Bearwarden," as they loved to call her, and being much afraid

of her, made up to her with the sweet facility and sincerity of their sex.

Yet in defiance of ciphers, coronets, visiting cards, blue hangings, the homage of lords, and the vassalage of ladies, there was something amiss. She caught herself continually looking back to the old days at Ecclesfield Manor, to the soft lawns and shady avenues, the fond father, who thought his darling the perfection of humanity, and whose face lit up so joyfully whenever she came into the room; the sweet delicate mother from whom she could never remember an unkind look nor an angry word; the hills, the river, the cottagers, the tenants, the flower garden, the ponies, and the old retriever that died licking her hand. She felt kindly towards Mrs. Stanmore, and wondered whether she had behaved quite as well to that lady as she ought, recalling many a little act of triumphant malice and overt resistance which afforded keen gratification to the rebel at the time. By an easy transition, she glided on to Dick Stanmore's honest and respectful admira-

tion, his courtesy, his kindness, his unfailing forbearance and good-humour. Bearwarden was not always good-humoured—she had found that out already. But as for Dick, she remembered how no mishap nor annoyance of his own ever irritated him in the slightest degree; how his first consideration always seemed to be *her* comfort and *her* happiness; how even in his deep sorrow, deceived, humiliated, cut to the heart, he had never so much as spoken one bitter word. How nobly had he trusted her about those diamonds! How well he had behaved to her throughout, and how fondly would he have loved and cherished her had she confided her future to his care! He must be strangely altered now, to avoid her like this. She was sure he recognised her, for she saw his face fall, saw him wince—that at least was a comfort—but never to shake hands, never even to stop and speak! Well, she had treated him cruelly, and perhaps he was right.

But this was not the actual grievance, after

all. She felt she would do precisely the same over again. It was less repentance that pained her, than retribution. Maud, for the first time in her life, was beginning to feel really in love, and with her own husband. Such an infatuation, rare as it is admirable, ought to have been satisfactory and prosperous enough. When ladies do so far condescend, it is usually a gratifying domestic arrangement for themselves and their lords; but in the present instance the wife's increasing affection afforded neither happiness to herself nor comfort to her husband. There was a "Something" always between them, a shadow, not of suspicion nor mistrust, for Bearwarden was frank and loyal by nature, but of coldness. She had a secret from him, and she was a bad dissembler; his finer instincts told him that he did not possess her full confidence, and he was too proud to ask it. So they lived together a few short weeks after marriage, on outward terms of courtesy and cordiality, but with this little rift of dissatisfaction gradually yet surely widening

into a fissure that should rend each of these proud unbending hearts in twain.

“What would I give to be like other wives,” thought Maud, looking at a half-length of her husband in uniform, which occupied the place of honour in her boudoir. “What is it? Why is it? I would love him so, if he would let me. How I wish I could be good—*really* good, like mamma was. I suppose it’s impossible now. I wonder if it’s too late to try.” And with the laudable intention of beginning amendment at once, Lady Bearwarden rang sharply to tell her servants she was “not at home to anybody till Lord Bearwarden came in, except”—and here she turned away from her own footman, that he might not see the colour rising in her face—“except a man should call with some silks and brocades, in which case he was to be shown up stairs at once.”

The door had scarcely closed ere the paper-cutter in Maud’s fingers broke short off at the handle. Her grasp tightened on it insensibly, while she ground and gnashed her small white

teeth, to think that she, with her proud nature, in her high position, should not be free to admit or deny what visitors she pleased. So dandies of various patterns, afoot, in tea-carts, and on hacks more or less deserving in thape and action, discharged themselves of their visiting-cards at Lady Bearwarden's door, and passed on in peace to fulfil the same rite elsewhere.

Two only betrayed an unseemly emotion when informed "her ladyship was not at home:" the one, a cheerful youth, bound for a water-party at Skindle's, and fearful of missing his train, thanked Providence audibly for what he called "an unexpected let off;" the other, an older, graver, and far handsomer man, suffered an expression of palpable discomfiture to overspread his comely face, and, regardless of observation, walked away from the door with the heavy step that denotes a heavy heart. Not that he had fallen in love with Lady Bearwarden—far from it. But there *was* a Somebody—that Somebody an adverse fate

had decreed he must neither meet to-day nor to-morrow, and the interval seemed to both of them wearisome, and even painful. But Maud was "Somebody's" dear friend. Maud either had seen her or would see her that very afternoon. Maud would let him talk about her, praise her, perhaps would even give her a message—nay, it was just possible she might arrive to pay a morning visit while he was there. No wonder he looked so sad to forego this series of chances; and all the while, if he had only known it, Fate, having veered round at luncheon-time, would have permitted him to call at Somebody's house, to find her at home, enchanted to see him, and to sit with her as long as he liked in the well-known room, with its flowers and sun-shades and globes of goldfish, and the picture over the chimney-piece, and its dear original by his side. But it is a game at cross-purposes all through this dangerous pastime; and perhaps its very *contretemps* are what make it so interesting to the players, so amusing to the lookers-on.

Lady Bearwarden grew fidgetty after a while. It is needless to say that "the man with some silks and brocades" to be admitted by her servants was none other than "Gentleman Jim," who, finding the disguise of a "travelling merchant" that in which he excited least suspicion in his interviews with her ladyship, had resolved to risk detection yet once more, and had given her notice of his intention.

We all remember Sinbad's Old Man of the Sea, and the grip of that merciless rider tightening closer and closer the longer he was carried by his disgusted victim. There is more truth in the fable than most of us would like to allow. If you once permit yourself to set up an "Old Man of the Sea," farewell to free agency, happiness, even tolerable comfort, from that time forth! Sometimes your burden takes the shape of a renewed bill, sometimes of a fatal secret, sometimes of an unwise attachment, sometimes only of a bad habit; but whatever it be, the further you carry it the heavier it seems to grow; and in this case

custom does not in the least degree reconcile you to the infliction. Up with your heels, and kick it off at any price! Even should you rick your back in the process, it is better to be crippled for life than eternally oppressed by a ruthless rider and an intolerable weight.

Gentleman Jim was becoming Lady Bearwarden's Old Man of the Sea. More than once of late he had forced himself on her presence when it was exceedingly inconvenient, and even dangerous to meet him. The promised interview of to-day had been extorted from her most unwillingly, and by threats, implied, if not expressed. She began to feel that she was no longer her own mistress—that she had lost her independence, and was virtually at the command of an inferior. To a proud nature like hers such a situation seemed simply intolerable.

Lord Bearwarden seldom came in much before it was time to dress for dinner; but young men's habits are not usually very regular, the monotonous custom of doing

everything by clockwork being a tedious concomitant of old age. Maud could not calculate on his absence at any particular hour of the day unless he were on duty, and the bare notion that she should *wish* thus to calculate fretted and chafed her beyond measure. It was a relief to hear the door-bell once more and prepare to confront the worst. A London servant never betrays astonishment, nor indeed any emotion whatever beyond a shade of dignified and forbearing contempt. The first footman showed Lady Bearwarden's suspicious-looking visitor into her boudoir with sublime indifference, returning thereafter leisurely and loftily to his tea. Maud felt her courage departing, and her defeat, like that of brave troops seized by panic, seemed all the more imminent for habitual steadiness and valour. She took refuge in an attempt to bully. "Why are you here?" said Maud, standing bolt upright, while Gentleman Jim, with an awkward bow, began as usual to unroll his goods. "I have told you often enough this

persecution must finish. I am determined not to endure it any longer. The next time you call I shall order my servants to drive you from the door. Oh! will you—*will* you not come to terms?"

His face had been growing darker and darker while she spoke, and she watched its expression as the Mediterranean fisherman watches a white squall gliding with fatal swiftness over the waters, to bring ruin and shipwreck and despair. It sometimes happens that the fisherman loses his head precisely at the wrong moment, so that foiled, helpless, and taken aback, he comes to fatal and irremediable grief. Thus Lady Bearwarden, too, found the nerve on which she prided herself failing when she most wanted it, and knew that the prestige and influence which formed her only safeguards were slipping from her grasp.

She had cowed this ruffian at their first meeting by an assumption of calm courage and superiority in a crisis when most women, thus confronted at dead of night by a house-

breaker, would have shrunk trembling and helpless before him. She had retained her superiority during their subsequent association by an utter indifference as to results, so long as they only affected character and fortune, which to his lower nature seemed simply incomprehensible; but now that her heart was touched she could no longer remain thus reckless, thus defiant. With womanly feelings came womanly misgivings and fear of consequences. The charm was lost, the spell broken, and the familiar spirit had grown to an exacting master from an obedient slave.

“That’s not the way as them speaks who’s had the pith and marrow out of a chap’s werry bones,” growled Jim. “There wasn’t no talkin’ of figure-footmen and drivin’ of respectable tradesmen from folks’ doors when a *man* was wanted, like this here. A *man*, I says, wot wasn’t afeard to swing, if so be as he could act honourable and fulfil his bargain.”

“I’ll pay anything. Hush! *pray*. Don’t speak so loud. What *must* my servants think?”

Consider the frightful risks I run. Why should you wish to make me utterly miserable—to drive me out of my senses? I'll pay anything—anything to be free from this intolerable persecution."

"Pay—pay anythink!" repeated Jim, slightly mollified by her distress, but still in a tone of deep disgust. "Pay. Ah! that's always the word with the likes of you. You think your blessed money can buy us poor chaps up, body, and heart, and soul. Blast your money! says I. There, that's not over civil, my lady, but it's plain speaking."

"What would you have me do?" she asked, in a low, plaintive voice.

She had sunk into an arm-chair, and was wringing her hands. How lovely she looked, now at her sore distress. It imparted the one feminine charm generally wanting in her beauty.

Gentleman Jim, standing over against her, could not but feel the old mysterious influence pervading him once more. "If you was to say to me, Jim, says you, I believe as you're a

true chap!—I believe as you'd serve of me, body and bones. Well, not for money. Money be d——d! But for good-will, we'll say. I believe as you thinks there's nobody on this 'arth as is to be compared of me, says you, and see, now, you shall come here once a week, once a fortnit, once a month, even; and I'll never say no more about drivin' of you away; but you shall see me, and I'll speak of you kind and h'affable; and whatever I wants done I'll tell you, do it: and it *will* be done; see if it won't! Why—why I'd be proud, my lady—there—and happy too. Ay, there wouldn't walk a happier man, nor a prouder, maybe, in the streets of London!"

It was a long speech for Jim. At its conclusion he drew his sleeve across his face and bent down to rearrange the contents of his bundle.

Tears were falling from her eyes at last. Noiselessly enough, and without that redness of nose, those contortions of face, which render them so unbecoming to most women.

"Is there no way but this?" she murmured.

“No way but this? It’s impossible! It’s absurd! It’s infamous! Do you know who I am? Do you know what you ask? How dare you dictate terms to *me*? How dare you presume to say I shall do this, I shall not do *that*? Leave my house this minute. I will not listen to another syllable!”

She was blazing out again, and the fire of pride had dried her tears ere she concluded. Anger brought back her natural courage, but it was too late.

Gentleman Jim’s face, distorted with fury, looked hideous. Under his waistcoat lurked a long, thin knife. Maud never knew how near, for one ghastly moment, that knife was to being buried in her round white throat.

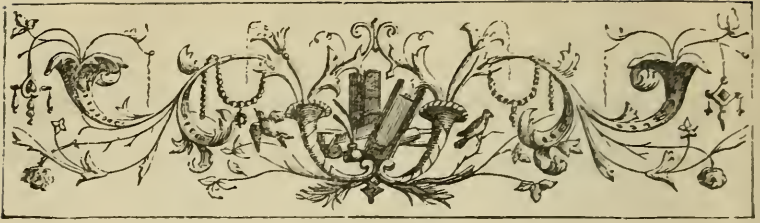
He was not quite madman enough, however, to indulge his passions so far, with the certainty of immediate destruction. “Have a care!” he hissed through his clenched teeth. “If you and me is to be enemies, look out! You know me—leastways you ought to. And *you* know I stick at nothing!”

She was still dreadfully frightened. Once more she went back to the old plea, and offered him fifty pounds, a hundred pounds. Anything!

He was tying the knots of his bundle. Completing the last, he looked up, and the glare in his eyes haunted her through many a sleepless night.

“You’ve done it now!” was all he muttered. “When next you see me you’ll wish you hadn’t.”

It speaks well for Jim’s self-command that, as he went down, he could say, “Your servant, my lord,” with perfect composure, to a gentleman whom he met on the stairs.



CHAPTER V.

“THE LITTLE CLOUD.”

LORD BEARWARDEN, like other noblemen and gentlemen keeping house in London, was not invariably fortunate in the selection of his servants. The division of labour, that admirable system by which such great results are attained, had been brought to perfection in his as in many other establishments. A man who cleaned knives, it appeared, could not possibly do anything else, and for several days the domestic arrangements below stairs had been disturbed by a knotty question as to *whose* business it was to answer “my lord’s bell.” Now my lord was what his

servants called rather “ a arbitrary gentleman,” seeming, indeed, to entertain the preposterous notion that these were paid their wages in consideration of doing as they were bid. It was not therefore surprising that figure-footmen, high of stature and faultless in general appearance, should have succeeded each other with startling rapidity, throwing up their appointments and doffing his lordship’s livery, without regard to their own welfare or their employer’s convenience, but in accordance with some Quixotic notions of respect for their office and loyalty to their order.

Thus it came about that a subordinate in rank, holding the appointment of second footman, had been so lately enlisted as not yet to have made himself acquainted with the personal appearance of his master ; and it speaks well for the amiable disposition of this recruit that, although his liveries were not made, he should, during the temporary absence of a fellow-servant, who was curling his whiskers below, have consented to answer the door.

Lord Bearwarden had rung like any other arrival ; but it must be allowed that his composure was somewhat ruffled when refused admittance by his own servant to his own house.

“ Her ladyship’s not at home, I tell ye,” said the man, apparently resenting the freedom with which this stranger proceeded into the hall, while he placed his own massive person in the way ; “ and if you want to see my lord, you just can’t—*that* I know !”

“ Why ?” asked his master, beginning to suspect how the land lay, and considerably amused.

“ Because his lordship’s particularly engaged. He’s having his ’air cut just now, and the dentist’s waiting to see him after he’s done,” returned this imaginative retainer, arguing indeed from his pertinacity that the visitor must be one of the swell mob, therefore to be kept out at any cost.

“ And who are *you* ?” said his lordship, now laughing outright.

“Who am I?” repeated the man. “I’m his lordship’s footman. Now, then who are *you*? That’s more like it!”

“I’m Lord Bearwarden himself,” replied his master.

“Lord Bearwarden! Oh! I dare say,” was the unexpected rejoinder. “Well, that *is* a good one. Come, young man, none of these games here: there’s a policeman round the corner.”

At this juncture the fortunate arrival of the gentleman with lately-curved whiskers, in search of his “Bell’s Life,” left on the hall-table, produced an *éclaircissement* much to the unbeliever’s confusion, and the master of the house was permitted to ascend his own staircase without further obstruction.

Meeting “Gentleman Jim” coming down with a bundle, it did not strike him as the least extraordinary that his wife should have denied herself to other visitors. Slight as was his experience of women and their ways, he had yet learned to respect those various rites

that constitute the mystery of shopping, appreciating the composure and undisturbed attention indispensable to a satisfactory performance of that ceremony.

But it *did* trouble him to observe on Lady Bearwarden's face traces of recent emotion, even, he thought, to tears. She turned quickly aside when he came into the room, busying herself with the blinds and muslin window-curtains; but he had a quick eye, and his perceptions were sharpened besides by an affection he was too proud to admit, while racked with cruel misgivings that it might not be returned.

“Gentleman-like man *that*, I met just now on the stairs!” he began, good-humouredly enough, though in a certain cold, conventional tone, that Maud knew too well, and hated accordingly. “Dancing partner, swell mob, smuggler, respectable tradesman, what is he? Ought to sell cheap, I should say. Looks as if he stole the things ready made. Hope you've done good business with him, my lady?”

May I see the plunder?" He never called her Maud; it was always "my lady," as if they had been married for twenty years. How she longed for an endearing word, slipping out, as it were, by accident—for a covert smile, an occasional caress. Perhaps had these been lavished more freely she might have rated them at a lower value.

Lady Bearwarden was not one of those women who can tell a lie without the slightest hesitation, calmly satisfied that "the end justifies the means;" neither did it form a part of her creed that a lie by implication is less dishonourable than a lie direct. On the contrary, her nature was exceedingly frank, even defiant, and from pride, perhaps, rather than principle, she scorned no baseness so heartily as duplicity. Therefore she hesitated now and changed colour, looking guilty and confused, but taking refuge, as usual, in self-assertion.

"I had business with the man," she answered, haughtily, "or you would not have found him

here. I might have got rid of him sooner, perhaps, if I had known you were to be home so early. I'm sure I hate shopping, I hate tradespeople, I hate——”

She was going to say “I hate everything,” but stopped herself in time. Counting her married life as yet only by weeks, it would have sounded too ungracious, too ungrateful!

“Why should you do anything you hate?” said her husband, very kindly, and to all appearance dismissing every suspicion from his mind, though deep in his heart rankled the cruel conviction that between them this strange, mysterious barrier increased day by day. “I want you to have as little of the rough and as much of the smooth in life as is possible. All the ups and none of the downs, my lady. If this fellow bores you, tell them not to let him in again. That second footman will keep him out like a dragon, I'll be bound.” Then he proceeded laughingly to relate his own adventure with his new servant in the hall.

He seemed cordial, kind, good-humoured

enough, but his tone was that of man to man, brother officer to comrade, not of a lover to his mistress, a husband to his lately-married wife.

She felt this keenly, though at the same time she could appreciate his tact, forbearance, and generosity in asking no more questions about her visitor. To have shown suspicion of Maud would have been at once to drive her to extremities, while implicit confidence put her on honour and rendered her both unable and unwilling to deceive. Never since their first acquaintance had she found occasion to test this quality of trust in her husband, and now it seemed that he possessed it largely, like a number of other manly characteristics. That he was brave, loyal, and generous she had discovered already; handsome and of high position she knew long ago, or she would never have resolved on his capture; and what was there wanting to complete her perfect happiness? Only one thing, she answered herself; but for it she would so willingly have bartered all the rest—that he should love her as Dick

Stanmore did. Poor Dick Stanmore! how badly she had treated him, and perhaps this was to be her punishment.

“Bearwarden,” she said, crossing the room to lean on the arm of his chair, “we’ve got to dine at your aunt’s to-night. I suppose they will be very late. I wish there were no such things as dinners, don’t you?”

“Not when I’ve missed luncheon, as I did to-day,” answered his lordship, whose appetite was like that of any other healthy man under forty.

“I hoped you wouldn’t,” she observed, in rather a low voice; “it was very dull without you. We see each other so seldom, somehow. I should like to go to the play to-morrow—you and I, Darby and Joan—I don’t care which house, nor what the play is.”

“To-morrow,” he answered, with a bright smile. “All right, my lady, I’ll send for a box. I forgot, though, I can’t go to-morrow, I’m on Guard.”

Her face fell, but she turned away that he

might not detect her disappointment, and began to feed her bullfinch in the window.

“ You’re always on Guard, I think,” said she, after a pause. “ I wonder you like it : surely it must be a dreadful tie. You lost your grouse-shooting this year and the Derby, didn’t you ? all to sit in plate armour and jack-boots at that gloomiest and stuffiest of Horse Guards. Bearwarden, I—I wish you’d give up the regiment, I do indeed.”

When Maud’s countenance wore a pleading expression, as now, it was more than beautiful, it was lovely. Looking in her face it seemed to him that it was as the face of an angel.

“ Do you honestly wish it ?” he replied, gently. “ I would do a great deal to please you, my lady ; but—no—I couldn’t do *that*.”

“ He can’t really care for me ; I knew it all along,” thought poor Maud, but she only looked up at him rather wistfully and held her peace.

He was gazing miles away, through the window, through the opposite houses, their

offices, their washing-ground, and the mews at the back. She had never seen him look so grave; she had never seen that soft, sad look on his face before. She wondered now that she could ever have regarded that face as a mere encumbrance and accessory to be taken with a coronet and twenty thousand a year.

“Would you like to know why I cannot make this sacrifice to please you?” he asked, in a low, serious voice. “I think you *ought* to know, my lady, and I will tell you. I’m fond of soldiering, of course. I’ve been brought up to the trade—that’s nothing. So I am of hunting, shooting, rackets, cricketing, London porter, and dry champagne; but I’d give them up, each and all, at a moment’s notice, if it made you any happier for ten minutes. I *am* a little ambitious, I grant, and the only fame I would care much for is a soldier’s. Still, even if my chance of military distinction were ten times as good I shouldn’t grudge losing it for your sake. No: what makes me stick to the regiment is what makes a fellow take a life-buoy

on board ship—the instinct of self-preservation. When everything else goes down he’s got that to cling to, and can have a fight for his life. Once, my lady, long before I had ever seen you, it was my bad luck to be very unhappy. I didn’t howl about it at the time, I’m not going to howl about it now. Simply, all at once, in a day, an hour, everything in the world turned from a joy to a misery and a pain. If my mother hadn’t taught me better, I should have taken the quickest remedy of all. If I hadn’t had the regiment to fall back upon I must have gone mad. The kindness of my brother officers I never can forget; and to go down the ranks scanning the bold, honest faces of the men, feeling that we had cast our lot in together, and when the time came would all play the same stake, win or lose, reminded me that there were others to live for besides myself, and that I had not lost everything, while yet a share remained invested in our joint venture. When I lay awake in my barrack-room at night I could hear the stamp and snort of the

old black troopers, and it did me good. I don't know the reason, but it did me good. You will think I was very unhappy—so I was.”

“But why?” asked Maud, shrewdly guessing, and at the same time dreading the answer.

“Because I was a fool, my lady,” replied her husband—“a fool of the very highest calibre. You have, no doubt, discovered that in this world folly is punished far more severely than villany. Deceive others, and you prosper well enough; allow yourself to be deceived, and you're pitched into as if you were the greatest rogue unhung. It's not a subject for you and me to talk about, my lady. I only mentioned it to show you why I am so unwilling to leave the army. Why, I *dare* not do it, even to please you.”

“But”—she hesitated, and her voice came very soft and low—“you—you are not afraid—I mean you don't think it likely, do you, that you will ever be so unhappy again? It was about—about somebody that you cared for, I suppose.”

She got it out with difficulty, and already hated that unknown Somebody with an unreasoning hatred, such as women think justifiable and even meritorious in like cases.

He laughed a harsh, forced laugh.

"What a fool you must think me," said he; "I ought never to have told you. Yes, it was about a woman, of course. You did not fancy I could be so soft, did you? Don't let us talk about it. I'll tell you in three words, and then will never mention the subject again. I trusted and believed in her. She deceived me, and that sort of thing puts a fellow all wrong, you know, unless he's very good-tempered, and I suppose I'm not. It's never likely to happen again, but still, blows of all sorts fall upon people when they least expect them, and that's why I can't give up the old corps, but shall stick by it to the last."

"Are you sure you haven't forgiven her?" asked Maud, inwardly trembling for an answer.

"Forgiven her!" repeated his lordship; "well, I've forgiven her like a Christian, as

they say—perhaps even more fully than that. I don't wish her any evil. I wouldn't do her a bad turn, but as for ever thinking of her or caring for her afterwards, that was impossible. No. While I confided in her freely and fully, while I gave up for her sake everything I prized and cared for in the world, while I was even on the verge of sending in my papers because it seemed to be her wish I should leave the regiment, she had her own secret hidden up from me all the time. That showed what she was. No; I don't think I could ever forgive *that*—except *as a Christian*, you know, my lady!"

He ended in a light sarcastic tone, for like most men who have lived much in the world, he had acquired a habit of discussing the gravest and most painful subjects with conventional coolness, originating perhaps in our national dislike of anything sentimental or dramatic in situation. He could have written probably eloquently and seriously enough, but to "speak like a book" would have lowered him, in his

own esteem, as being unmanly no less than ungentlemanlike.

Maud's heart ached very painfully. A secret then, kept from him by the woman he trusted, was the one thing he could not pardon. Must this indeed be her punishment? Day by day to live with this honourable, generous nature, learning to love it so dearly, and yet so hopelessly, because of the great gulf fixed by her own desperate venture, risked, after all, that she might win *him*! For a moment, under the influence of that great tide of love which swelled up in her breast, she felt as if she must put her whole life's happiness on one desperate throw, and abide the result. Make a clean breast; implore his forgiveness, and tell him all.

She had been wandering about while he spoke, straightening a table-cover here, snipping a dead leaf off a geranium there, and otherwise fidgetting to conceal her emotion. Now she walked across the room to her husband's side, and in another minute perhaps the whole truth

would have been out, and these two might have driven off to dinner in their brougham, the happiest couple in London; but the door was thrown wide open, and the student of "Bell's Life," on whose whiskers the time employed in curling them had obviously not been thrown away, announced to her ladyship, with much pomp, that her carriage was at the door.

"Good gracious!" exclaimed Maud, "and your aunt is always so punctual. You must dress in ten minutes, Bearwarden. I'm certain I can. Run down this moment, and don't stop to answer a single letter if it's a case of life and death."

And Lady Bearwarden, casting all other thoughts to the winds in the present emergency, hurried up stairs after the pretty little feet of her French maid, whose anxiety that her lady should not be late, and perhaps a certain curiosity to know the cause of delay, had tempted her down at least as far as the first landing, while my lord walked to his dressing-

room on the ground-floor, with the comfortable conviction that he might spend a good half-hour at his toilette, and would then be ready a considerable time before his wife.

The reflections that chased each other through the pretty head of the latter while subjected to Justine's skilful manipulations, I will not take upon me to detail. I may state, however, that the dress she chose to wear was trimmed with Bearwarden's favourite colour; that she carried a bunch of his favourite flowers on her breast and another in her hair.

A brougham drawn by a pair of long, low, high-stepping horses, at the rate of twelve miles an hour, is an untoward vehicle for serious conversation when taking its occupants out to dinner, although well adapted for tender confidence or mutual recrimination on its return from a party at night. Lady Bearwarden could not even make sure that her husband observed she had consulted his taste in dress. Truth to tell, Lord Bearwarden was only conscious that his wife looked exceedingly handsome, and that

he wished they were going to dine at home. Marriage had made him very slow, and this inconvenient wish lasted him all through dinner, notwithstanding that it was his enviable lot to sit by a fast young lady of the period, who rallied him with exceeding good taste on his wife, his house, his furniture, manners, dress, horses, and everything that was his. Once, in extremity of boredom, he caught sight of Maud's delicate profile five couples off, and fancied he could detect on the pale, pure face something of his own weariness and abstraction. After that the fast young lady "went at him," as she called it, in vain. Later, in the drawing-room, she told another damsel of her kind that "Bruin's marriage had utterly spoilt him. Simply ruination, my dear! So unlike men in general. What he could see in her I can't make out! She looks like death, and she's not *very* well dressed, in my opinion. I wonder if she bullies him. He used to be such fun. So fast, so cheery, so delightfully satirical, and as wicked as Sin!"

Maud went home in the brougham by herself. After a tedious dinner, lasting through a couple of hours, enlivened by the conversation of a man he can't understand, and the persecutions of a woman who bores him, it is natural for the male human subject to desire tobacco, and a walk home in order to smoke. Somehow, the male human subject never does walk straight home with its cigar. Bearwarden, like others of his class, went off to Pratt's, where, we will hope, he was amused, though he did not look it. A cigar on a close evening leads to soda water, with a slice of lemon, and, I had almost forgotten to add, a small modicum of gin. This entails another cigar, and it is wonderful how soon one o'clock in the morning comes round again. When Lord Bearwarden turned out of St. James's Street it was too late to think of anything but immediate bed. Her ladyship's confessions, if she had any to make, must be put off till breakfast-time, and, alas! by *her* breakfast-time, which was none of the earliest, my lord was well down in his sheep-

skin, riding out of the barrack-gate in command of his guard.

“*Fronte capillatâ post est Occasio calav!*”

Bald-pated Father Time had succeeded in slipping his forelock out of Maud's hand the evening before, and, henceforth, behind his bare and mocking skull, those delicate, disappointed fingers must close on empty air in vain!



CHAPTER VI.

FURENS QUID FŒMINA.

WE left Tom Ryfe, helpless, unconscious, more dead than alive, supported between a man and woman up a back street in Westminster : we must return to him after a considerable interval, pale, languid, but convalescent, on a sofa in his own room under his uncle's roof. He is only now beginning to understand that he has been dangerously ill ; that according to his doctor nothing but a "splendid constitution" and unprecedented medical skill have brought him back from the threshold of that grim portal known as death's door. This he does not quite believe, but is

aware, nevertheless, that he is much enfeebled, and that his system has sustained what he himself calls "a deuced awkward shake." Even now he retains no very clear idea of what happened to him. He remembers vaguely, as in a dream, certain bare walls of a dim and gloomy chamber, tapestried with cobwebs, smelling of damp and mould like a vault, certain broken furniture, shabby and scarce, on a bare brick floor, with a grate in which no fire could have been kindled without falling into the middle of the room. He recalls that racking headache, that scorching thirst, and those pains in all the bones of a wan, wasted figure lying under a patchwork quilt on a squalid bed. A figure, independent of, and dissevered from himself, yet in some degree identified with his thoughts, his sufferings, and his memories. Somebody nursed the figure, too—he is sure of that—bringing it water, medicines, food, and leeches for its aching temples; smoothing its pillow and arranging its bed-clothes, in those endless nights, so much longer, yet scarce more dismal

than the days,—somebody, whose voice he never heard, whose face he never saw, yet in whose slow, cautious tread there seemed a familiar sound. Once, in delirium, he insisted it was Miss Bruce, but even *through* that delirium he knew he must be raving, and it was impossible. Could that be a part of his dream, too, in which he dragged himself out of bed, to dress in his own clothes, laid out on the chair that had hitherto carried a basin of gruel or a jug of cooling drink? No, it must have been reality surely, for even to-day he has so vivid a remembrance of the fresh air, the blinding sunshine, and the homely life-like look of that four-wheeled cab waiting in the narrow street, which he entered mechanically, which, *as* mechanically brought him home to his uncle's house, the man asking no questions, nor stopping to receive his fare. To be sure, he fainted from utter weakness at the door. Of that he is satisfied, for he remembers nothing between the jolting of those slippery cushions and another bed in which he found

himself, with a grave doctor watching over him, and which he recognised, doubtfully, as his own.

Gradually, with returning strength, Tom began to suspect the truth, that he had been hocused and robbed. His pockets, when he resumed his clothes, were empty. Their only contents, his cigar-case and Miss Bruce's letter, were gone. The motive for so desperate an attack he felt unable to fathom. His intellect was still affected by bodily weakness, and he inclined at first to think he had been mistaken for somebody else. The real truth only dawned on him by degrees. Its first ray originated with no less brilliant a luminary than old Bargrave.

To do him justice, the uncle had shown far more natural affection than his household had hitherto believed him capable of feeling. During his nephew's absence, he had been like one distracted, and the large reward offered for discovery of the missing gentleman sufficiently testified his anxiety and alarm. When Tom

did return, more dead than alive, Bargrave hurried off in person to procure the best medical advice, and postponing inquiry into his wrongs to the more immediate necessity of nursing the sufferer, spent six or seven hours out of the twenty-four at the sick man's bedside.

The first day Tom could sit up his uncle thought well to enliven him with a little news, social, general, and professional. Having told him that he had outbid Mortlake for the last batch of poor Mr. Chalkstone's port, and stated, at some length, his reasons for doubting the stability of Government, he entered gleefully upon congenial topics, and proceeded to give the invalid a general sketch of business affairs during his retirement.

"I've worked the coach, Tom," said he, walking up and down the room, waving his coat-tails, "as well as it *could* be worked, single-handed. I don't think you'll find a screw loose anywhere. Ah, Tom! an old head, you know, is worth a many pair of hands. When

you're well enough, in a week or so, my lad, I shall like to show you how I've kept everything going, though I was so anxious, terribly anxious, all the time. The only matter that's been left what you call *in statu quo* is that business of Miss Bruce's, which I had nothing to do with. It will last you a good while yet, Tom, though it's of less importance to her now, poor thing!—don't you move, Tom—I'll hand you the barley-water—because she's Miss Bruce no longer."

Tom gasped, and hid his pale, thin face in the jug of barley-water. He had some pluck about him, after all; for weak and ill as he was he managed to get out an indifferent question.

"Not Miss Bruce, isn't she? Ah! I hadn't heard. Who is she then, uncle? I suppose you mean she's—she's married." He was so husky, no wonder he took another pull at the barley-water.

"Yes, she's married," answered his uncle, in the indifferent tone with which threescore years and odd can discuss that fatality. "Made a

good marriage, too—an excellent marriage. What do you think of a peerage, my boy? She's Viscountess Bearwarden now. Twenty thousand a year, if it's a penny. I am sure of it, for I was concerned in a lawsuit of the late lord's twenty years ago. I don't suppose you're acquainted with her husband, Tom. Not in our circle, you know; but a most respectable young man, I understand, and likely to be lord-lieutenant of his county before long. I'm sure I trust she'll be happy. And now, Tom, as you seem easy and comfortable, perhaps you'd like to go to sleep for a little. If you want anything you can reach the bell, and I'll come and see you again before I dress for dinner."

Easy and comfortable! When the door shut behind his uncle, Tom bowed his head upon the table and gave way completely. He was unmanned by illness, and the shock had been too much for him. It was succeeded, however, and that pretty quickly, by feelings of bitter wrath and resentment, which did more

to restore his strength than all the tonics in the world. An explanation, too, seemed now afforded to much that had so mystified him of late. What if, rendered desperate by his threats, Miss Bruce had been in some indirect manner the origin of his captivity and illness—Miss Bruce, the woman who of all others owed him the largest debt of gratitude (like most people, Tom argued from his own side of the question); for whom he had laboured so unremittingly, and was willing to sacrifice so much? Could it be so? And if it was, should he not be justified in going to any extremity for revenge? Revenge—yes, that was all he had to live for now; and the very thought seemed to put new vigour into his system, infuse fresh blood in his veins. So is it with all baser spirits; and perhaps in the indulgence of this cowardly craving they obtain a more speedy relief than nobler natures from the first agony of suffering; but their cure is not and never can be permanent; and to them must remain unknown that strange wild strain of

some unearthly music which thrills through those sore hearts that can repay good for evil, kindly interest for cold indifference; that, true to themselves and their own honour, can continue to love a memory, though it be but the memory of a dream.

Tom felt as if he could make an exceedingly high bid, involving probity, character, good faith, and the whole of his moral code, for an auxiliary who should help him in his vengeance. Assistance was at hand even now, in an unexpected moment and an unlooked-for shape.

“A person wishes to see you, sir, if you’re well enough,” said a little housemaid who had volunteered to provide for the wants of the invalid, and took very good care of him indeed.

“What sort of a person?” asked Tom, languidly, feeling, nevertheless, that any distraction would be a relief.

“Well, sir,” replied the maid, “it seems a respectable person, I should say. Like a sick-nurse, or whatnot.”

There is no surmise so wild but that a rejected

lover will grasp at and connect it with the origin of his disappointment. "I'll see her," said Tom, stoutly, not yet despairing but that it might be a messenger from Maud.

He certainly *was* surprised when Dorothea, whom he recognized at once, even in her Sunday clothes, entered the room, with a wandering eye and a vacillating step.

"You'll never forgive me, Master Tom," was her startling salutation. "It's me as nursed you through it; but you'll never forgive me—never! And I don't deserve as you should."

Dorothea was nervous, hysterical, but she steadied herself bravely, though her fingers worked and trembled under her faded shawl.

Tom stared, and his visitor went on.

"You'd a-died for sure if I hadn't. Don't ye cast it up to me, Master Tom. I've been punished enough. Punished! If I was to bare my arm now I could show you weals that's more colours and brighter than your neckankercher there. I've been served worse

nor that, though, since. I ain't a-goin' to put up with it no longer. Master Tom, do you know as you've been put upon, and by who?"

His senses were keenly on the alert. "Tell me the truth, my good girl," said he, "and I'll forgive you all your share. More, I'll stick by you through thick and thin."

She whimpered a little, affected by the kindness of his tone, but, tugging harder at her shawl, proceeded to further confessions.

"You was hocussed, Master Tom; and I can point out to you the man as did it. You'd 'a been murdered amongst 'em if it hadn't been for me. Who was it, d'ye think, as nussed of you, and cared for you, all through, and laid out your clothes ready brushed and folded, and went and got you a cab the day as you come back here? Master Tom, I've been put upon too. Put upon and deceived, as never yet was born woman used so bad; and it's my turn now! Look ye here, Master Tom. It's that villain, Jim—Gentleman Jim, as we calls him—what's been at the bottom of this here. And

yet there's worse than Jim in it too. There's others that set Jim on. Oh! to believe as a fine handsome chap like him could turn out to be so black-hearted, and such a soft too. She'll never think no more of him, for all his comely face, than the dirt beneath her feet."

"*She!*" repeated Tom, intensely interested, and therefore preternaturally calm. "What d'ye mean by *she*? Don't fret, that's a good girl, and don't excite yourself. Tell your story your own way, you know, but keep as quiet as you can. You're safe enough here."

"We'd been asked in church," replied Dorothea, somewhat inconsequently. "Ah! more than once, we had. And I'd ha' been as true to him, and was, as ever a needle to a stitch. Well, sir, when he slights of me, and leaves of me, why it's natural as I should run up and down the streets a-lookin' for him like wild. So one day, after I'd done my work, and put things straight, for I never was one of your sluttish ones, Master Tom—and your uncle, he's always been a kind gentleman to me, and a

h'affable, like yourself, Master Tom—according, I comes upon my Jim at the Sunflower, and I follows him unbeknown for miles and miles right away to the West-end. So he never looks behind him, nor he never stops, o' course, till he comes to Belgrave Square; and he turns down a street as I couldn't read its name, but should know it again as well as I know my own hand. And then, Master Tom, if you'll believe me, I thought as I must have dropped."

"Well?" said Tom, not prepared to be satisfied with this climax, though his companion stopped, as if she had got to the end of her disclosures.

"Well indeed!" resumed Dorothea, after a considerable interval, "when he come that far, I know'd as he must be up to some of his games, and I watched. They lets him into a three-storied house, and I sees him in the best parlour with a lady, speaking up to her, but not half so bold as usual. He's not often dashed, Jim isn't. I will say that for him."

“What sort of a lady?” asked Tom, quivering with excitement. “You took a good look at her, I’ll be bound!”

“Well, a real lady in a muslin dress,” answered Dorothea. “A tall young lady—not much to boast of for looks, but with hair as black as your hat and a face as white as cream. Very ’aughty too an’ arbitrary, and seemed to have my Jim like quite at her command. So from where I stood I couldn’t help hearing everything that passed. My Jim, he gives her the very letter as laid in your pocket that night, as you—as you was taken so poorly, you know. And from what she said and what he said, and putting this and that together, I’m sure as they got you out of the way between them, Master Tom, and gammoned me into the job too, when I’d rather have cut both my hands off, if I’d only known the truth.”

Tom sat back on his sofa, shutting his eyes that he might concentrate his powers of reflection. Yes, it was all clear enough at last. The nature and origin of the outrage to which he

had been subjected were obvious, nor could he entertain any further doubt of Maud's motives, though marvelling exceedingly, as well he might, at her courage, her recklessness, and the social standing of her accomplice. It seemed to him as if he could forgive every one concerned but her. This poor woman who had fairly thrown herself on his mercy: the ruffian whose grip had been at his throat, but who might hereafter prove as efficient an ally as he had been a formidable enemy. Only let him have Maud in his power, that was all he asked, praying him to spare her, kneeling at his feet, and then without a shade of compunction to ruin, and crush, and humble her to the dust!

He saw his way presently, but he must work warily, he told himself, and use all the tools that came to his hand.

“If you can clear the matter up, Dorothea,” said he, kindly, “I will not visit your share in it on your head, as I have already told you. Indeed I believe I owe you my life. But this

man you mention, this Gentleman Jim as you call him, can you find him? Do you know where he is? My poor girl! I think I understand. Surely you deserved better treatment at his hands."

The kind words produced this time no softening effect, and Tom knew enough of human nature to feel sure that she was bent on revenge as earnestly as himself, while he also knew that he must take advantage of her present humour at once, for it might change in an hour.

"If I could lay my hand on him," answered Dorothea, fiercely, "it's likely I'd leave my mark! I've looked for him now, high and low, every evening and many arternoons, better nor a week. I ain't come on him yet, the false-hearted thief! but I seen *her* only the day before yesterday, seen her walk into a house in Berners Street as bold as you please. I watched and waited better nor two hours, for, thinks I, he won't be long follerin'; and I seen her come out agin with a gentleman, a comely young

gentleman; I'd know him anywheres, but he warn't like my Jim."

"Are you sure it was the same lady?" asked Tom, eagerly, but ashamed of putting so unnecessary a question when he saw the expression of Dorothea's face.

"Am I *sure*?" said she, with a short gasping laugh. "Do you suppose as a woman can be mistook as has been put upon like me? Lawyers is clever men, askin' your pardon, Mr. Ryfe, but there's not much sense in such a question as yours: I seen the lady, sir, and I seen the house; that's enough for *me*!"

"And you observed the gentleman narrowly?" continued Tom, stifling down a little pang of jealousy that was surely unreasonable now.

"Well, I didn't take much notice of the gentleman," answered Dorothea, wearily, for the reaction was coming on apace. "It warn't my Jim, I know. You and me has both been used bad, Master Tom, and it's a shame, it is. But the weather's uncommon close, and it's a

long walk here, and I'm a'most fit to drop, askin' your pardon, sir. I wrote down the number of the 'ouse, Master Tom, to make sure—there it is. If you please, I'll go down stairs, and ask the servants for a cup o' tea, and I wish you a good arternoon, sir, and am glad to see you lookin' a trifle better at last."

So Dorothea departed to enjoy the luxury of strong tea and unlimited gossip with Mr. Bargrave's household, drawing largely on her invention in explanation of her recent interview, but affording them no clue to the real object of her visit.

Tom Ryfe was still puzzled. That Maud (he could not endure to think of her as Lady Bearwarden)—that Maud should, so soon after her marriage, be seen going about London by herself under such questionable circumstances was strange, to say the least of it, even making allowances for her recklessness and wilful disposition, of which no one could be better aware than himself. What could be her object? though he loved her so fiercely in his

own way, he had no great opinion of her discretion; and now, in the bitterness of his anger, was prepared to put the very worst construction upon everything she did. He recalled, painfully enough, a previous occasion on which he had met her, as he believed, walking with a stranger in the Park, and did not forget her displeasure while cutting short his inquiries on the subject. After all, it occurred to him almost immediately that the person with whom she had been lately seen was probably her own husband. He would not himself have described Lord Bearwarden exactly as a "comely young gentleman," but on the subject of manly beauty Dorothea's taste was probably more reliable than his own. If so, however, what could they be doing in Berners Street? Pshaw! How this illness had weakened his intellect! Having her picture painted, of course! what else could bring a doting couple, married only a few weeks, to that part of the town? He cursed Dorothea bitterly for her ridiculous surmises and specu-

lations—cursed the fond pair—cursed his own wild unconquerable folly—cursed the day he first set eyes on that fatal beauty, so maddening to his senses, so destructive to his heart; and thus cursing staggered across the room to take his strengthening draught, looked at his pale, worn face in the glass, and sat down again to think.

The doctor had visited him at noon, and stated with proper caution that in a day or two, if amendment still progressed satisfactorily, “carriage exercise,” as he called it, might be taken with undoubted benefit to the invalid. We all know, none better than medical men themselves, that if your doctor says you may get up to-morrow, you jump out of bed the moment his back is turned. Tom Ryfe, worried, agitated, unable to rest where he was, resolved that he would take his carriage exercise without delay, and to the housemaid’s astonishment, indeed much against her protest, ordered a hansom cab to the door at once.

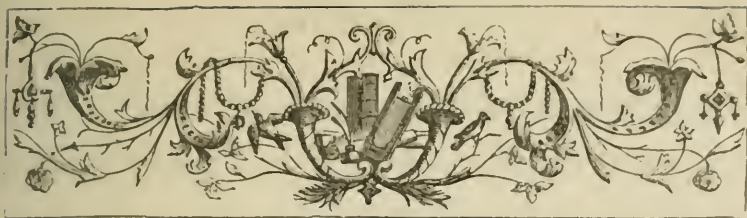
Though so weak he could not dress without

assistance, he no sooner found himself on the move, and out of doors, than he began to feel stronger and better; he had no object in driving beyond change of scene, air, and exercise; but it will not surprise those who have suffered from the cruel thirst and longing which accompanies such mental maladies as his, that he should have directed the cabman to proceed to Berners Street.

It sometimes happens that when we thus “draw a bow at a venture” our random shaft hits the mark we might have aimed at for an hour in vain. Tom Ryfe esteemed it an unlooked-for piece of good fortune that turning out of Oxford Street he should meet another hansom going at speed in an opposite direction, and containing—yes, he could have sworn to them before any jury in England—the faces, very near each other, of Lady Bearwarden and Dick Stanmore.

It was enough. Dorothea’s statement seemed sufficiently corroborated, and after proceeding to the number she indicated, as if to satisfy

himself that the house had not walked bodily away, Mr. Ryfe returned home very much benefited in his own opinion by the drive, though the doctor, visiting his patient next day, was disappointed to find him still low and feverish, altogether not so much better as he expected.



CHAPTER VII.

“NOT FOR JOSEPH.”

BUT Dick Stanmore was *not* in a hansom with Lady Bearwarden. Shall I confess, to the utter destruction of his character for undying constancy, that he did not wish to be?

Dick had been cured at last—cured of the painful disease he once believed mortal—cured by a course of sanitary treatment, delightful in its process, unerring in its results; and he walked about now with the buoyant step, the cheerful air of one who has been lightened of a load lying next his heart.

Medical discoveries have of late years

brought into vogue a science of which I have borrowed the motto for these volumes. *Similia similibus curantur* is the maxim of homœopathy; and whatever success this healing principle may obtain with bodily ailments, I have little doubt of its efficacy in affections of the heart. I do not mean to say its precepts will render us invulnerable or immortal. There are constitutions that, once shaken, can never be restored; there are characters that, once outraged, become saddened for evermore. The fairest flowers and the sweetest, are those which, if trampled down, never hold up their heads again. But I do mean, that should man or woman be capable of cure under sufferings originating in misplaced confidence, such cure is most readily effected by a modified attack of the same nature, at the risk of misplacing it again.

After Dick Stanmore's first visit to the painting-room in Berners Street, it was astonishing how enthusiastic a taste he contracted for art. He was never tired of contemplating his

friend's great picture, and Simon used laughingly to declare the amateur knew every line and shade of colour in his *Fairy Queen* as accurately as the painter. He remained in London at a season which could have afforded few attractions for a young man of his previous habits, and came every day to the painting-room as regularly as the model herself. Thus it fell out that Dick, religiously superintending the progress of this *Fairy Queen*, found his eyes wandering perpetually from the representation on canvas to its original on Miss Algeron's shoulders, and gratified his sense of sight with less scruple, that from the very nature of her occupation she was compelled to keep her head always turned one way.

It must have been agreeable for Nina, no doubt, if not improving, to listen to Dick's light and rather trivial conversation, which relieved the monotony of her task, and formed a cheerful addition to the short jerking, pre-occupied sentences of the artist, enunciated obviously at random, and very often with a

brush in his mouth. Nor was it displeasing, I imagine, to be aware of Mr. Stanmore's admiration, forsaking day by day its loudly-declared allegiance to the Fairy Queen in favour of her living prototype, deepening gradually to long intervals of silence, sweeter, more embarrassing, while far more eloquent than words.

And all the time, Simon, the chivalrous, painted on. I cannot believe but that, with the jealous instinct of true affection, he must have perceived the ground slipping away, hour by hour, from beneath his feet—must have seen the ship that carried all his cargo sailing further and further into a golden distance to leave him desolate on the darkening shore. How his brain may have reeled, and his heart ached, it is not for me to speculate. There is a decency of courage, as there is an extravagance of bravado, and that is the true spirit of chivalry which bleeds to death unmoved, beneath its armour, keeping the pale knightly face turned calm and constant towards the foe.

It was a strange trio, that, in the painting-room. The garden of Eden seems to have been originally intended for two. The third was doubtless an intruder, and from that day to this how many a paradise has been lost by admittance of the visitor who completes this uneven number, unaccountably supposed to be so productive of good fortune.

Curious cross purposes were at work in the three heads grouped so near each other opposite the painter's glowing canvas. Dick perhaps was the least perceptive and therefore the happiest of the party. His sense of well-being, indeed, seemed enhanced by his previous troubles: like a man who comes out of the cold into the glow of a comforting fire, he abandoned himself without much reflection to the positive enjoyment of pleasure and the negative solace of relief from pain.

Simon, always painting, fought hard to keep down that little leavening of self which constitutes our very identity. Under the cold impassive vigour he was so determined to

preserve, he registered many a noble vow of fortitude and abnegation on behalf of the friend he valued, of the woman he loved. Sometimes a pang would shoot through him painfully enough while he marked a change of Nina's colour, a little flutter of manner, a little trembling of her hands, and felt that she was already more affected by the presence of this comparative stranger than she had ever shown herself by his, who had cared for her so tenderly, worshipped her so long. Then he bent all his faculties on the picture, and like a child running to seize its mother's gown, took refuge with his art.

That mistress did not fail him. She never does fail the true worshipper, who kneels consistently at her shrine. It is not for her to scorn the homage offered to-day because it has been offered in faith and loyalty during many a long past year. It is not for her to shed on the new votary her sweetest smiles only because he *is* new. Woo her frankly, love her dearly, and serve her faithfully, she will insure you

from being cozened out of your reward. Had she not taken care of Simon at this period, I scarcely know what would have become of him.

Nina, too, lived in a golden dream, from which it was her only fear that she must soon awake. Ere long, she sometimes thought, she must ask herself, who was this stranger that brought with him a flood of sunshine into the homely painting-room? that steeped for her unconsciously and without effort, every day in happiness, every morning in hope? She put off asking the question, having perhaps a wholesome recollection of him, who, going to count his treasure of fairy gold, found it only withered leaves, and let herself float with the stream, in that enjoyment of the present which is enhanced rather than modified by misgivings for the future. Nina was very happy, that is the honest truth, and even her beauty seemed to brighten like the bloom on a flower, opening to the smile of spring.

Simon marked the change. How could he help it? And still he painted—painted on.

“There!” exclaimed the artist, with a sigh of relief, as he stepped back from his picture, stretching both weary arms above his head. “At last—at last! If I only like it to-morrow as well as I do now not another touch shall go into it anywhere above the chin. It’s the expression I’ve been trying to catch for months. There it is! Doubt, sorrow, remorse, and, through it all, the real undying love of the——Well, that’s all cant! I mean—Can’t you see, that she likes him awfully even now? Nina, you’ve been the making of me, you’re the best sitter in the world, and while I look at my picture I begin to think you’re the handsomest. I mustn’t touch it again. Stand more, what do you think?”

Absorbed in contemplation of his work, he paid little attention to the answer, which was so far fortunate, that Dick, in his preoccupation, faltered out a string of contradictory criticisms, flattering neither to the original nor the copy. Nina indeed suggested, with some truth, that he had made the eyebrows too dark,

but this remark appeared to originate only in a necessity for something to say. These two young people seemed unusually shy and ill at ease. Perhaps in each of the three hearts beating there before the picture lurked some vague suspicion that its wistful expression, so lately caught, may have been owing to corresponding feelings lately awakened in the model; and, if so, why should not two of them have thrilled with happiness, though the third might ache in loneliness and despair?

“Not another stroke of work will I do to-day,” said the artist, affecting a cheerfulness which perhaps he did not feel. “Nina, you’ve got to be back early. I’ll have a half-holiday for once and take you home. Put your bonnet on: I shall be ready in five minutes when I’ve washed my hands.”

Dick’s face fell. He had counted on a couple more hours at least. Women, when they are really disappointed, rarely show it, and perhaps he felt a little hurt to observe how readily, and with what apparent goodwill, Miss

Algernon resumed her out-of-doors attire. He felt hardly sure of his ground yet, or he might have begun to sulk in earnest. No bad plan either, for such little misunderstandings bring on explanations, reconciliations, declarations, all sorts of vexations, every day!

Ladies are stanch believers in luck, and leave much to chance with a devout faith that it will serve them at their need. I imagine Nina thought it quite in the natural course of events that a dirty boy should enter the room at this juncture and deliver a note to Simon, which called forth all his energies and sympathies in a moment. The note, folded in a hurry, written with a pencil, was from a brother artist, and ran thus—

“DEAR SIMON,

“Come and see me if you *can*. On my back! Two doctors. Not going to be rubbed out, but beastly seedy all the same.”

“When was he taken ill? Who’s attending him? Anybody taking care of him? What

o'clock is it now? Tell him I'll be there in five minutes." Simon delivered himself of these sentences in a breath, and then glanced from Nina to Dick Stanmore.

"I dare say you wouldn't mind," said he. "I *must* go to this poor fellow, and if I find him very ill I may be detained till evening. If you've time, Stanmore, could you see Miss Algernon as far as the boat? She'll do very well then, but we don't like her to be wandering about London by herself."

It is possible this idea may have suggested itself to the persons most concerned, for all that they seemed so supremely unconscious, and as if the arrangement, though a sensible one and convenient, no doubt, were a matter of perfect indifference to themselves.

Dick "would be delighted," of course; though he tried not to look so; and Nina "couldn't think of giving Mr. Stanmore so much trouble." Nevertheless, within ten minutes the two were turning into Oxford Street in a hansom cab; and although they

said very little, being indeed in a vehicle which jolted, swung, and rattled inordinately, I have not the least doubt they enjoyed their drive.

They enjoyed the river steamer, too, which seems equally strange, with its narrow deck, its tangible smoke, its jerks and snorts, and throbbing vibrations, as it worked its way against the tide. They had never before been alone together, and the situation, though delightful, was at first somewhat embarrassing, because they were in earnest. The restraint, however, soon wore off, and with tongues once loosened there was no lack of matter for their employment. How beautiful, how interesting, how picturesque everything seemed to have grown all at once: the Houses of Parliament—the bridges—the dull, broad surface of the river, grey, with a muddy tinge—the low, level banks—the blunt-nosed barges—their fellow-passengers—the engineer—the boy with the mop—and the dingy funnel of the steamer itself.

How mysterious the charm that lurks in

association of ideas! What magic it imparts to the commonest actions, the most vulgar objects of life! What a heartache on occasions has it not caused you or me? One of us cannot see a woman fitting on her gloves without a pang. To another there is a memory and a sorrow in the flirt of a fan, the rustle of a dress, the grinding of a barrel-organ, or the slang of a street song. The stinging-nettle crops up in every bed of flowers we raise; the bitter tonic flavours all we eat and drink. I dare say Werther could not munch his bread and butter for years in common comfort because of Charlotte. Would it not be wiser for us to ignore the Charlottes of life altogether, and stick to the bread and butter?

Too soon that dingy steamer reached its place of disembarkation—too soon, at least, for certain of its passengers; and yet in their short voyage up the river each of these two had passed the portal of a paradise, through which, amongst all its gaudy and luxuriant vegetation, you may search for the tree of knowledge in

vain. Not a word was spoken by either that could bear the direct interpretation of love-making, yet each felt that the Rubicon had been passed which must never be recrossed dry-shod again.

Dick paid his respects, as seemed but right and proper, to the Misses Perkins, who voted him an exceedingly agreeable young man ; and this was the more tolerant on their part that he found very little to say, and had the good taste to be a very short time in saying it. They asked him, indeed, to remain for dinner, and, notwithstanding their hospitable inclinations, were no doubt relieved when he declined. He had gained some experience, you see, from his previous worship of Miss Bruce, which now stood him in good stead, for in affairs of love, as of honour, a man conducts his second with more skill and *savoir faire* than his first.

The world seemed to have changed by magic while he went back to London. It felt like the breaking up of a frost, when all is warmth and softness and vitality once more.

He could have talked to himself, and laughed aloud for very joy.

But Nina went to her room, and cried as she had not cried since she was a little child, shedding tears of mingled sweetness and sorrow, rapture and remorse. Her eyes were opened now in her new-found happiness, and she foresaw the crushing blow that happiness must inflict on the oldest, kindest, dearest of friends.

For the first time in her life she took herself to task and examined her own heart. What a joyous heart it was! And yet how could she be so inhuman as to admit a pleasure which must be cruelly productive of another's pain? Here was a person whom she had known, as it were, but yesterday, and his lightest word or glance had already become dearer to her than the wealth of care and affection which tended her from childhood, which would be about her to her grave. It was infamous! she told herself, and yet it was surpassingly sweet! Yes, she loved this man—this brown-haired, broad-shouldered Mr. Stanmore, of whose existence

a fortnight ago she had been perfectly unconscious, and in that love she learned to appreciate and understand the affection loyal, true-hearted Simon lavished on herself. Was he to be sacrificed to this mere stranger? Never! Rather she would sacrifice herself. But the tears flowed faster to think that it would indeed be a sacrifice, an offering up of youth, beauty, hope, happiness for life. Then she dried her eyes, and went down on her knees to pray at her bedside; and so rose up, making certain stern resolutions, which it is only fair to state she afterwards kept—like a woman!

With the view, doubtless, of putting these in practice, she induced Simon to walk with her on the lawn after tea, while the stars were twinkling dimly through a soft, misty sky, and the lazy river lapped and gurgled against the garden banks. He accompanied her, nothing loth, for he too had spent the last hour in hard painful conflict, making, also, stern resolutions, which he kept—like a man! “You found him better,” she said, alluding to the cause of

his delay in returning home. “I’m so glad. If he hadn’t been, you’d have stayed with him all night, I know. Simon, I think you’re the best and the kindest person in the world.”

Here was an opening. Was she disappointed, or not, that he took so little advantage of it?

“We must all help each other, Nina,” said he; “that’s the way to make life easy and to stifle sorrows, if we have them, of our own.”

“*You* ought never to have a sorrow,” she broke in. “*You*, who always think of others before yourself—you deserve to be so happy. And, Simon, sometimes I think you’re not, and it makes me wretched; and I’d do anything in the world to please you; anything, if—if it wasn’t *too* hard a task, you know.”

She had been so eager to make her sacrifice and get it over that she hurried inconsiderately to the brink,—then, like a timid bather, stopped short, hesitating—the water looked so cold and dark and deep.

The lightest touch from his hand would have plunged her in, overhead. He would

have held it in the fire rather, like the Roman hero, till it shrivelled into ashes.

“My happiness can never be apart from yours,” he said, tenderly and sadly. “Yet I think I know now that yours is not entirely bound up in mine. Am I right, Nina?”

“I would do anything in the world for you—anything,” she murmured, taking refuge, as we all do at such times, in vain repetition.

They had reached the drawing-room window, and she turned aside, as if she meant to go in. He took her hand lightly in his own, and led her back towards the river. It was very dark, and neither could read the expression of the other's face.

“I have but one earnest desire in the world,” said he, speaking distinctly, but very low. “It is to see you happily settled in life. I never had a sister nor a daughter, Nina. You have stood me in the stead of both; and—and I shall never have a wife.”

She knew what he meant. The quiet, sad, yet uncomplaining tone cut her to the heart.

“It’s a shame! it’s a shame!” she murmured. “Simon, Simon. Tell me; don’t you think me the worst, the most ungrateful, the most horrible girl in the world?”

He spoke cheerfully now, and even laughed. “Very ungrateful,” he repeated, pressing her hand kindly; “and very detestable, unless you tell me the truth. Nina, dear Nina, confide in me as if I was your—well—your grandmother! Will that do? I think there’s a somebody we saw to-day who likes you very much. He’s a good fellow, and to be trusted, I can swear. Don’t you think, dear, though you haven’t known him long, that *you* like *him* a little—more than a little, already?”

“Oh, Simon, what a brute I am, and what a fool!” answered the girl, bursting into tears. And then the painter knew that his ship had gone down, and the waters had closed over it for evermore. That evening his aunts thought Simon in better spirits than usual. Nina, though she went to bed before the rest, had never found him kinder, more cheerful, more

considerate. He spoke playfully, good-humouredly, on various subjects, and kissed the girl's forehead gravely, almost reverently, when she wished him good-night.

It was such a caress as a man lays on the dead face that shall never look in his own again.

The painter slept but little—perhaps not at all. And who shall tell how hard he wrestled with his great sorrow during those long hours of darkness, “even to the breaking of the day?” No angel sat by his bed to comfort him, nor spirit-voices whispered solace in his ear, nor spirit-sympathy poured balm into the cold, aching, empty heart; but I have my own opinion on such matters, and I would fain believe that struggles and sufferings like these are neither wasted nor forgotten, but are treasured and recorded by kindred beings of a higher nature, as the training that alone fits poor humanity, then noblest, when most sorrowful, to enter the everlasting gates and join the radiant legions of heaven.



CHAPTER VIII.

ANONYMOUS.

LORD BEARWARDEN finds himself very constantly on Guard just at present. Her ladyship is of opinion that he earns his pay more thoroughly than any day-labourer his wages. I do not myself consider that helmet, cuirass, and leather breeches form the appropriate appliances of a hero, when terminating in a pair of red morocco slippers. Nevertheless, in all representations purporting to be life-like, effect must be subservient to correctness of detail; and such was the costume in which his lordship, on duty at the Horse Guards, received a despatch that seemed to cause him considerable surprise and vexation.

The guard coming off was mustering below. The relief coming on was already moving gallantly down Regent Street, to the admiration of all beholders. Armed was his lordship to the teeth, though not to the toes, for his bătman waited respectfully with a pair of high jack-boots in his hand, and still his officer read, and frowned, and pulled his moustache, and swore, as the saying is, like a trooper, which, if he had only drawn on his boots, would not have been so much out of character at the time.

Once again he read it from end to end ere he crumpled the note in under his cuirass for future consideration. It ran as follows:—

“MY LORD,

“Your lordship’s manly and generous character has obtained for you many well-wishers. Of these the writer is one of the most sincere. It grieves and angers him to see your lordship’s honest nature deceived, your domestic happiness destroyed, your noble confidence abused. The writer, my lord, is your true

friend. Though too late for rescue it is not too late for redress; and he has no power of communicating to your lordship suspicions which now amount to certainty but by the means at present employed. Anonymous letters are usually the resource of a liar and slanderer; but there is no rule without exception; and the writer can bring *proof* of every syllable he asserts. If your lordship will use your own eyes, watch and wait. She has deceived others; why not *you*? Berners Street, Oxford Street, is no crowded thoroughfare. Why should your lordship abstain from walking there any afternoon between four and five? Be wary. Watch and wait."

"Blast his impudence!" muttered Lord Bearwarden, now booted to the thigh, and clattering down stairs to take command of his guard.

With zealous subalterns, an experienced corporal-major, well-drilled men, and horses that knew their way home, it required little

military skill to move his handful of cavalry back to barracks, so Lord Bearwarden came off duty without creating scandal or ridicule in the regiment; but I doubt if he knew exactly what he was doing, till he arrived in plain clothes within a few paces of his own door. Here he paused for a few minutes' reflection before entering his house, and was surprised to see at the street corner a lady extremely like his wife in earnest conversation with a man in rags who had the appearance of a professional beggar. The lady, as far as he could judge at that distance, seemed to be offering money which the man by his actions obviously refused. Lord Bearwarden walked briskly towards them, a good deal puzzled, and glad to have his attention distracted from his own affairs.

It was a long street, and the couple separated before he reached them, the man disappearing round the corner, while the lady advanced steadily towards himself. When within a few paces she lifted a thick double veil, and he found he had not been mistaken.

Maud was pale and calm as usual, but to those who knew her well recent agitation would have been betrayed by the lowering of her eyebrows, and an unusual compression of the lines about her mouth.

He knew her better than she thought, and did not fail to remark these signs of a recent storm, but, as usual, refrained from asking for the confidence it was his right to receive.

“You’re out early, my lady,” said he, in a careless tone. “Been for an appetite against luncheon-time, eh? That beggar just now didn’t seem hungry, at any rate. It looked to me as if you were offering him money, and he wouldn’t take it. That’s quite a new trick in the trade.”

She glanced quickly in his face with something almost of reproach. It was a hateful life this, and even now, she thought, if he would question her kindly, she could find it in her heart perhaps to tell him all. All! How she had deceived him, and promised herself to another, and to get rid of that other, only for

a time, had rendered herself amenable to the law—had been guilty of actual crime—had sunk to feel the very slave of a felon, the lowest refuse of society. How she, Lady Bearwarden, had within the last ten minutes been threatened by this ruffian, been compelled to submit to his insolence, to make terms with his authority, and to promise him another interview that very afternoon. How every hour of her life was darkened by terror of his presence and dread of his revenge. It was unheard of! Unbearable! She would make a clean breast of it on the first opportunity.

“Let’s go in, dear,” she said, with more of softness and affection than was her habit when addressing her husband. “Luncheon is almost ready. I’m so glad you got away early from barracks. I see so little of you now. Never mind. It will be all right next week. We shall have two more captains back from leave to help us. You see I’m beginning to know the rolster almost as well as the Adjutant himself.”

It pleased him that she should show an interest in these professional details. He liked to hear such military terms of the orderly-room from those pretty lips, and he would have replied with something unusually affectionate, and therefore exceedingly precious, but that, as husband and wife reached their own door, they found standing there to greet them the pale wasted face and attenuated figure of Tom Ryfe.

He saluted Lady Bearwarden gravely, but with perfect confidence, and she was obliged to give him her hand, though she felt as if she could have strangled him with pleasure, then and there, by the scraper. Her husband clapped him heartily on the back. "Glad to see you, Tom," said he; "I heard you were ill and called to inquire, but they wouldn't let me disturb you. Been devilish seedy, haven't you? Don't look *quite* in form yet. Come in and have some luncheon. Doctors all tell one to keep up the system now-a-days."

Poor Lady Bearwarden! Here was another

of her avengers, risen, as it seemed, from the dead, and she must speak kind words, find false smiles, bid him to her table, and treat him as an honoured guest. Whatever happened, too, she could not endure to leave him alone with Bearwarden. Who could tell what disclosures might come out? She was walking on a mine, so she backed her husband's invitation, and herself led the way into the dining-room where luncheon was ready, not daring even to go upstairs and take her bonnet off before she sat down.

Mr. Ryfe was less communicative than usual about himself, and spoke as little to her ladyship as seemed compatible with the ordinary forms of politeness. His object was to lull her suspicions and put her off her guard. Nevertheless, with painful attention she watched every glance of his eye, every turn of his features, hanging eagerly, nervously, on every word he said.

Tom had laid his plan of attack, and now called on the lately-married couple, that he

might reconnoitre his ground before bringing up his forces. It is not to be supposed that a man of Mr. Ryfe's resources would long remain in ignorance of the real truth, after detecting, as he believed at the time, Lady Bearwarden and Dick Stanmore side by side in a hansom cab.

Ere twenty-four hours had elapsed he had learned the exact state of the case, and had satisfied himself of the extraordinary resemblance between Miss Algernon and the woman he had resolved to persecute without remorse. In this resemblance he saw an engine with which he hoped to work her ladyship's utter destruction, and then (Tom's heart leapt within him even now at the thought), ruined, lonely, desolate, when the whole world turned from her, she might learn to appreciate his devotion, might take shelter at last with the only heart open to receive her in her shame.

It is hard to say whether Tom's feelings for the woman he so admired were of love or hate.

He saw through Lord Bearwarden's nature thoroughly, for of him, too, he had made it his business to inquire into all the tendencies, all the antecedents. A high fastidious spirit, jealous, because sensitive, yet far too proud to admit, much less indulge that jealousy, seemed of all others the easiest to deceive. The hide of the rhinoceros is no contemptible gift, and a certain bluntness, I might say, coarseness of character, enables a man to go through the world comfortably and happily, unvexed by those petty stings and bites and irritations that worry thinner skins to death. With Lord Bearwarden to suspect was to fret and ponder and conceal, hating and despising himself the while. He had other points, besides his taste for soldiering, in common with Othello.

On such a man an anonymous letter acted like a blister, clinging, drawing, inflaming all round the affected part. Nobody in theory so utterly despised these productions. For nobody in practice did they produce so disastrous an effect. And then he had been deceived once

before. He had lost his trust, not so much in the other sex (for all men think every woman false but one), as in himself. He had been outraged, hurt, humbled, and the bold confidence, the *dash* with which such games should be played were gone. There is a buoyancy gradually lost as we cross the country of life, which is perhaps worth more than all the gains of experience. And in the real pursuit, as in the mimic hurry of the chase, it is wise to avoid too hazardous a venture. The hunter that has once been overhead in a brook never faces water very heartily again.

Tom could see that his charm was working, that the letter he had written produced all the effect he desired. His host was obviously preoccupied, absent in manner, and even flurried, at least for *him*. Moreover, he drank brown sherry out of a claret-glass, which looked like being uncomfortable somewhere inside. Lady Bearwarden, grave and unusually silent, watched her husband with a sad, wistful air, that goaded Tom to madness. How he had loved that

pale, proud face, and it was paler and prouder and lovelier than ever to-day!

“I’ve seen some furniture you’d like to look at, my lord,” said Tom, in his old, underbred manner. “There’s a chair I’d buy directly if I’d a house to put it in, or a lady to sit on it; and a carved ebony frame it’s worth going all the distance to see. If you’d nothing to do this afternoon, I’d be proud to show them you. Twenty minutes’ drive from here in a hansom.”

“Will you come?” asked Lord Bearwarden, kindly, of his wife. “You might take us in the barouche.”

She seemed strangely agitated by so natural a proposal, and neither gentleman failed to remark her disorder.

“I shall like it very much,” she stammered. “At least I should. But I can’t this afternoon. I—I’ve got an engagement at the other end of the town.”

“Which *is* the other end of the town?” said Lord Bearwarden, laughing. “You’ve not told us *your* end yet, Tom;” but seeing

his wife's colour fade more and more, he purposely filled Tom's glass to distract his attention.

Her engagement was indeed of no pleasant nature. It was to hold another interview with "Gentleman Jim," in which she hoped to prevail on him to leave the country by offering the largest sum of money she could raise from all her resources. Once released from his persecutions, she thought she could breathe a little, and face Tom Ryfe well enough single-handed, should he try to poison her husband's mind against her—an attempt she thought him likely enough to make. It was Jim she feared—Jim, whom drink and crime, and an infatuation of which she was herself the cause, had driven almost mad—she could see it in his eye—who was reckless of her character as of his own—who insisted on her giving him these meetings two or three times a-week, and was capable of any folly, any outrage, if she disappointed him. Well, to-day should end it! On that she was determined. If he

persisted in refusing her bribe, she would throw herself on Lord Bearwarden's mercy and tell him the whole truth.

Maud had more self-command than most women, and could hold her own even in so false a position as this.

"I must get another gown," she said, after a moment's pause, ignoring Tom's presence altogether as she addressed her husband across the table. "I've nothing to wear at the Den, if it's cold when we go down next week, so I *must* call at Stripe and Rainbow's to-day, and I won't keep you waiting in the carriage all the time I'm shopping."

He seemed quite satisfied: "Then I'll take Ryfe to my sulking-room," said he, "and wish you good-bye till dinner-time. Tom, you shall have the best cigar in England—I've kept them five years, and they're strong enough to blow your head off now."

So Tom, with a formal bow to Lady Bearwarden, followed his host into a snug but dark apartment at the back, devoted, as was at

once detected by its smell, to the consumption of tobacco.

While he lit a cigar, he could not help thinking of the days, not so long ago, when Maud would have followed him, at least with her eyes, out of the room, but consoled himself by the reflection that his turn was coming now, and so smoked quietly on with a firm, cruel determination to do his worst.

Thus it came to pass that, before they had finished their cigars, these gentlemen heard the roll of her ladyship's carriage as it took her away; also that a few minutes later, passing *Stripe and Rainbow's* in a hansom cab, they saw the same carriage, standing empty at the door of that gorgeous and magnificent emporium.

“Don't get out, Tom,” said his lordship, stopping the hansom, “I only want to ask a question—I shan't be a minute;” and in two strides he was across the pavement and within the folding-doors of the shop.

Perhaps the question he meant to ask was

of his own common-sense, and its answer seemed hard to accept philosophically. Perhaps he never expected to find what he meant to look for, yet was weak enough to feel disappointed all the same—for he had turned very pale when he re-entered the cab, and he lit another cigar without speaking.

Though her carriage stood at the door, he had searched the whole of Stripe and Rainbow's shop for Lady Bearwarden in vain.

Tom Ryfe was not without a certain mother-wit, sharpened by his professional education. He suspected the truth, recalling the agitated manner of his hostess at luncheon, when her afternoon's employment came under notice. Will it be believed that he experienced an actual pang, to think she should have some assignation, some secret of which his lordship must be kept in ignorance—that he should have felt more jealous of this unknown, this possible rival, than of her lawful husband now sitting by his side! He was no bad engineer, however, and having laid his train, waited

patiently for the mine to explode at its proper time.

“What an outlandish part of the town we are getting to,” observed Lord Bearwarden, after several minutes’ silence; “your furniture-man seems to live at the other end of the world.”

“If you want to buy things at first hand you must go into Oxford Street,” answered Tom. “Let’s get out and walk, my lord; it’s so crowded here we shall make better way.”

So they paid their hansom, and threading the swarms of passengers on the footway, turned into Berners Street arm-in-arm.

Tom walked very slow for reasons of his own, but made himself pleasant enough, talking on a variety of subjects, and boasting his own good taste in matters of curiosity, especially old furniture.

“I wish you could have induced the viscountess to come with us,” said Tom, “we should have been all the better for her help. But ladies have so many engagements in the afternoon we know nothing about, that it’s

impossible to secure their company without several days' notice. I'll be bound her ladyship is in Stripe and Rainbow's still."

There was something in the casual remark that jarred on Lord Bearwarden, more than Tom's absurd habit of thus bestowing her full title on his wife in common conversation, though even that provoked him a little too; something to set him thinking, to rouse all the pride and all the suspicion of his nature. "The viscountess," as Tom called her, was *not* in Stripe and Rainbow's, of that he had made himself perfectly certain less than half an hour ago; then where *could* she be? Why this secrecy, this mystery, this reserve, that had been growing up between them day by day ever since their marriage? What conclusion was a man likely to arrive at who had lived in the world of London from boyhood, and been already once so cruelly deceived? His blood boiled; and Tom, whose hand rested on his arm, felt the muscle swell and quiver beneath his touch.

Mr. Ryfe had timed his observation well; the two gentlemen were now proceeding slowly up Berners Street, and had arrived nearly opposite the house that contained Simon's painting-room, its hard-working artist, its frequent visitor, its beautiful sitter, and its Fairy Queen. Since his first visit there Tom Ryfe, in person or through his emissaries, had watched the place strictly enough to have become familiar with the habits of its inmates.

Mr. Stanmore's trial trip with Miss Algernon proved so satisfactory, that the journey had been repeated on the same terms every day: this arrangement, very gratifying to the persons involved, originated indeed with Simon, who now went regularly after work to pass a few hours with his sick friend. Thus, to see these two young people bowling down Berners Street in a hansom cab, about five o'clock, looking supremely happy the while, was as good a certainty as to meet the local pot-boy, or the postman.

Tom Ryfe manœuvred skilfully enough to

bring his man on the ground precisely at the right moment.

Still harping on old furniture, he was in the act of remarking that "he should know the shop again, though he had forgotten the number, and that it must be a few doors higher up," when his companion started, uttered a tremendous execration, and struggling to free himself from Tom's arm, holloaed at an unconscious cabdriver to stop.

"What's the matter? are you ill, my lord?" exclaimed his companion, holding on to him with all his weight, while affecting great anxiety and alarm.

"D——n you! let me go!" exclaimed Lord Bearwarden, nearly flinging Tom to the pavement as he shook himself free and tore wildly down the street in vain pursuit.

He returned in a minute or two, white, scared, and breathless. Pulling his moustache fiercely, he made a gallant effort to compose himself; but when he spoke, his voice was so changed, Tom looked with surprise in his face.

“You saw it too, Tom!” he said at last, in a hoarse whisper.

“Saw it!—saw what?” repeated Tom, with an admirable assumption of ignorance, innocence, and dismay.

“Saw Lady Bearwarden in that cab with Dick Stanmore!” answered his lordship, steady-ing himself bravely like a good ship in a breeze, and growing cooler and cooler, as was his nature in an emergency.

“Are you sure of it?—did you see her face? I fancied so myself, but thought I must be mistaken. It was Mr. Stanmore, no doubt, but it cannot possibly have been the vis-countess.”

Tom spoke with an air of gravity, reflection, and profound concern.

“I may settle with *him*, at any rate!” said Lord Bearwarden. “Tom, you’re a true friend; I can trust you like myself. It’s a comfort to have a friend, Tom, when a fellow’s smashed up like this. I shall bear it well enough presently; but it’s an awful facer, old boy. I’d have done

anything for that woman—I tell you, anything! I'd have cut off my right hand to please her. And now!—It's not because she doesn't care for me—I've known that all along; but to think that she's like—like those poor painted devils we met just now. Like them!—she's a million times worse! Oh, it's hard to bear! Damnation! I *won't* bear it! Somebody will have to give an account for this!"

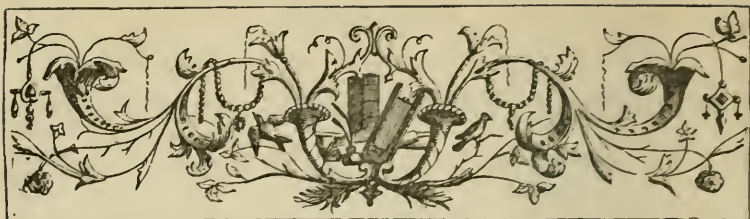
"You have my sympathy," said Tom, in a low respectful voice, for he knew his man thoroughly; "these things won't stand talking about; but you shall have my assistance too, in any and every way you require. I'm not a swell, my lord, but I'll stick by you through thick and thin."

The other pressed his arm. "We must do something at once," said he. "I will go up to barracks now: call for me there in an hour's time; I shall have decided on everything by then."

So Lord Bearwarden carried a sore heart back once more to the old familiar scenes—

through the well-known gate, past the stalwart sentry, amongst all the sights and sounds of the profession by which he set such store. What a mockery it seemed!—how hard, how cruel, and how unjust!

But this time at least, he felt, he should not be obliged to sit down and brood over his injuries without reprisals or redress.



CHAPTER IX.

PARTED.

LADY BEARWARDEN'S carriage had, without doubt, set her down at Stripe and Rainbow's, to take her up again at the same place after waiting there for so long a period as must have impressed on her servants the importance of their lady's toilet, and the careful study she bestowed on its selection. The tall bay horses had been flicked at least a hundred times to make them stand out and show themselves, in the form London coachmen think so imposing to passers-by. The footman had yawned as often, expressing with each contortion an excessive longing for beer. Many street boys had

lavished their criticisms, favourable and otherwise, on the wheels, the panels, the varnish, the driver's wig, and that dignitary's legs, whom they had the presumption to address as "John." Diverse connoisseurs on the pavement had appraised the bay horses at every conceivable price—some men never can pass a horse or a woman without thinking whether they would like to bargain for the one or make love to the other; and the animals themselves seemed to have interchanged many confidential whispers, on the subject, probably, of beans,—when Lady Bearwarden reappeared, to seat herself in the carriage and give the welcome order, "Home!"

She had passed what the French call a very "bad little quarter of an hour," and the storm had left its trace on her pale brow and delicate features. They bore, nevertheless, that firm, resolute expression which Maud must have inherited from some ironhearted ancestor. There was the same stern clash of the jaw, the same hard, determined frown in this, their

lovely descendant, that confronted Plantagenet and his mailed legions on the plains by Stirling, that stiffened under the wan moonlight on Culloden Moor amongst broken claymores and riven targets, and tartans all stained to the deep-red hues of the Stuart with his clansmen's blood.

Softened, weakened by a tender, doubting affection, she had yielded to an ignoble, unworthy coercion; but it had been put on too hard of late, and her natural character asserted itself under the pressure. She was in that mood which makes the martyr and the heroine, sometimes even the criminal, but on which, deaf to reason and insensible to fear, threats and arguments are equally thrown away.

She had met "Gentleman Jim," according to promise, extorted from her by menaces of everything that could most outrage her womanly feelings and tarnish her fair fame before the world—had met him with as much secrecy, duplicity, and caution as though he were really the favoured lover for whom she was prepared

to sacrifice home, husband, honour, and all. The housebreaker had mounted a fresh disguise for the occasion, and flattered himself, to use his own expression, that he looked "quite the gentleman from top to toe." Could he have known how this high-bred woman loathed his tawdry ornaments, his flash attire, his silks and velvets, and flushed face, and dirty, ringed hands and greasy hair!

Could he have known! He *did* know, and it maddened him till he forgot reason, prudence, experience, common sense—forgot everything but the present torture, the cruel longing for the impossible, the accursed conviction (worse than all the stings of drink and sin and remorse), that this one wild, hopeless desire of his existence could never be attained.

Therefore, in the lonely street to which a cab had brought her from the shop where her carriage waited, and which they paced to and fro, this strangely-assorted pair, he gave vent to his feelings, and broke out in a paroxysm that roused all his listener's feelings of anger,

resistance, and disgust. She had just offered him so large a sum of money to quit England for ever, as even Jim, for whom, you must remember, every sovereign represented twenty shillings' worth of beer, could not refuse without a qualm. He hesitated, and Maud's face brightened with a ray of hope that quivered in her eyes like sunlight. "To sail next week," said he, slowly; "to take my last look of ye to-day. Them's the articles. My last look. Standing there in the daylight—a *real* lady! And never to come back no more!"

She clasped her hands—the delicate gloved hands, with their heavy bracelets at the wrists, and her voice shook while she spoke. "You'll go; won't you? It will make your fortune; and—and—I'll always think of you kindly—and—gratefully. I *will* indeed; so long as you keep away."

He sprang like a horse to the lash. "It's h—ll!" he exclaimed. "Put back your cursed money. I won't do it!"

"You won't do it?"

There was such quiet despair in her accents as drove him to fury.

“I won’t do it!” he repeated in a low voice that frightened her. “I’ll rot in a gaol first!—I’ll swing on a gallows!—I’ll die in a ditch! Take care as *you* don’t give me something to swing for! Yes, *you*, with your pale face, and your high-handed ways, and your cold, cruel heart that can send a poor devil to the other end o’ the earth with a ‘pleasant trip, and here’s your health, my lad,’ like as if I was goin’ across to Lambeth. And yet you stand there as beautiful as a h’angel; and I—I’m a fool, I am! And—and I don’t know what keeps me from slippin’ my knife into that white throat o’ your’n, except it is as you don’t look not a morsel dashed, nor skeared, you don’t; no more than you was that first night as ever I see your face. And I wish my eyes had been lime-blinded first, and I’d been dead and rotting in my grave.”

With anything like a contest, as usual, Maud’s courage came back.

“I am not in your power yet,” said she, raising her haughty head. “There stands the cab. When we reach it I get in, and you shall never have a chance of speaking to me after to-day. Once for all. Will you take this money, or leave it? I shall not make the offer again.”

He took the notes from her hand, with a horrible oath, and dashed them on the ground; then, growing so pale she thought he must have fallen, seemed to recover his temper and his presence of mind, picked them up, returned them very quietly, and stood aside on the narrow pavement to let her pass.

“You are right,” said he, in a voice so changed, she looked anxiously in his white face, working like that of a man in a fit. “I was a fool a while ago. I know better now. But I won’t take the notes, my lady. Thank ye kindly just the same. I’ll wish ye good mornin’ now. Oh, no! Make yourself easy. I’ll never ask to see ye again.”

He staggered while he walked away, and laid

hold of an area railing as he turned the street corner ; but Maud was too glad to get rid of her tormentor at any price to speculate on his meaning, his movements, or the storm that raged within his breast.

And now, sitting back in her carriage, bowling homeward, with the fresh evening breeze in her face, the few men left to take their hats off looked in that face, and while making up their minds that after all it was the handsomest in London, felt instinctively they had never coveted the ownership of its haughty beauty so little as to-day. Her husband's cornet, walking with a brother subaltern, and saluting Lady Bearwarden, or, rather, the carriage and horses, for her ladyship's eyes and thoughts were miles away, expressed the popular feeling perhaps with sufficient clearness when he thus delivered himself, in reply to his companion's loudly-expressed admiration—

“The best-looking woman in London, no doubt, and the best turned out. But I think Bruin's got a handful, you know. Tell ye

what, my boy, I'm generally right about women. She looks like the sort that, if they once *begin* to kick, never leave off till they've knocked the splinter-bar into toothpicks and carried away the whole of the front boot."

Maud, all unconscious of the light in which she appeared to this young philosopher, was meanwhile hardening her heart with considerable misgivings for the task she had in view, resolved that nothing should now deter her from the confession she had delayed too long. She reflected how foolish it was not to have taken advantage of the first confidences of married life by throwing herself on her husband's mercy, telling him all the folly, imprudence, crime of which she had been guilty, and imploring to be forgiven. Every day that passed made it more difficult, particularly since this coolness had arisen between them, which, although she felt it did not originate with herself, she also felt a little pliancy on her part, a little warmth of manner, a little expressed affection, would have done much to counteract

and put away. She had delayed it too long ; but " Better late than ever." It should be done to-day ; before she dressed for dinner ; the instant she got home. She would put her arms round his neck, and tell him that the worst of her iniquities, the most unpardonable, had been committed for love of *him* ! She could not bear to lose him (Maud forgot that in those days it was the coronet she wanted to capture). She dreaded falling in his esteem. She dared all, risked all, because without him life must have been to *her*, as it is to so many, a blank and a mistake. But supposing he put on the cold, grave face, assumed the conventional tone she knew so well, told her he could not pardon such unladylike, such unwomanly proceedings, or that he did not desire to intrude on confidences so long withheld ; or, worse than all, that they did very well as they were, got on—he had hinted as much once before—better than half the married couples in London, why, she must bear it. This would be part of the punishment ; and at least she could have

the satisfaction of assuring him how she loved him, and of loving him heartily, humbly, even without return.

Lady Bearwarden had never done anything humbly before. Perhaps she thought this new sensation might be for her good—might make her a changed woman, and in such change happier henceforth.

Tears sprang to her eyes. How slow that man drove; but, thank heaven! here she was, home at last.

On the hall-table lay a letter in her husband's handwriting, addressed to herself. "How provoking!" she muttered, "to say he dines out, of course. And now I must wait till to-morrow. Never mind."

Passing upstairs to her boudoir, she opened it as she entered the room, and sank into a chair, with a faint, passionate cry, like that of a hare, or other weak animal, struck to the death. She had courage, nevertheless, to read it over twice, so as thoroughly to master the contents. During their engagement they used to meet

every day. They had not been parted since their marriage. It was the first, literally the very first, letter she had ever received from him.

“I have no reproaches to make,” it said, “nor reasons to offer for my own decision. I leave both to your sense of right, if indeed yours can be the same as that usually accepted amongst honourable people. I have long felt some mysterious barrier existed between you and me. I have only an hour ago discovered its disgraceful nature, and the impossibility that it can ever be removed. You cannot wonder at my not returning home. Stay there as long as you please, and be assured I shall not enter that house again. You will not probably wish to see or hold any communication with me in future, but should you be so ill-advised as to attempt it, remember I have taken care to render it impossible. I know not how I have forfeited the right to be treated fairly and on the square, nor why *you*, of all the world, should have felt entitled to make me your

dupe, but this is a question on which I do not mean to enter, now nor hereafter. My man of business will attend to any directions you think proper to give, and has my express injunctions to further your convenience in every way, but to withhold my address and all information respecting my movements. With a sincere wish for your welfare, I remain,

“Yours, &c.,

“BEARWARDEN.”

She was stunned, stupefied, bewildered. What had he found out? What could it mean? She had known of late she loved him very dearly; she never knew till now the pain such love might bring. She rocked herself to and fro in her agony, but soon started up into action. She must do *something*. She could not sit there under his very picture looking down on her, manly, and kind, and soldierlike. She ran downstairs to his room. It was all disordered just as he had left it, and an odour of tobacco clung heavily round the curtains

and furniture. She wondered now she should ever have disliked the fumes of that unsavoury plant. She could not bear to stay there long, but hurried upstairs again to ring for a servant, and bid him get a cab at once, to see if Lord Bearwarden was at the barracks. She felt hopelessly convinced it was no use; even if he were, nothing would be gained by the assurance, but it seemed a relief to obtain an interval of waiting and uncertainty and delay. When the man returned to report that "his lordship had been there and gone away again" she wished she had let it alone. It formed no light portion of her burden that she must preserve an appearance of composure before her servants. It seemed such a mockery while her heart was breaking, yes, breaking, in the desolation of her sorrow, the blank of a future without *him*.

Then in extremity of need she bethought her of Dick Stanmore, and in this I think Lady Bearwarden betrayed, under all her energy and force of character, the softer

elements of woman's nature. A man, I suppose, under any pressure of affliction would hardly go for consolation to the woman he had deceived. He partakes more of the wild beast's sulkiness, which, sick or wounded, retires to mope in a corner by itself; whereas a woman, as indeed seems only becoming to her less firmly-moulded character, shows in a struggle all the qualities of valour except that one additional atom of final endurance which wins the fight at last. In real bitter distress they must have some one to lean on. Is it selfishness that bids them carry their sorrows for help to the very hearts they have crushed and trampled? Is it not rather a noble instinct of forgiveness and generosity which tells them that if their mutual cases were reversed they would themselves be capable of affording the sympathy they expect?

Maud knew that, to use the conventional language of the world in which they moved, "she had treated Dick ill." We think very lightly of these little social outrages in the

battle of life, and yet I doubt if one human being can inflict a much deeper injury on another than that which deprives the victim of all power of enjoyment, all belief in good, all hope for the future, all tender memories of the past. Man or woman, we ought to have some humane compunction, some little hesitation in sitting down to play at that game from which the winner rises only wearied with unmerited good fortune, the loser, haggard, miserable, stripped and beggared for life.

It was owing to no forbearance of Lady Bearwarden's that Dick had so far recovered his losses as to sit down once more and tempt fortune at another table; but she turned to him nevertheless in this her hour of perplexity, and wrote to ask his aid, advice, and sympathy in her great distress.

I give her letter, though it never reached its destination, because I think it illustrates certain feminine ideas of honour, justice, and plain dealing which must originate in some code of reasoning totally unintelligible to ourselves.

“DEAR MR. STANMORE,

“You are a true friend I feel sure. I have always considered you, since we have been acquainted, the truest and most tried amongst the few I possess. You told me once, some time ago, when we used to meet oftener than we have of late, that if ever I was in sorrow or difficulty I was to be sure and let you know. I am in sorrow and difficulty now—great sorrow, overwhelming difficulty. I have nobody that cares for me enough to give advice or help, and I am so very, *very* sad and desolate. I think I have some claim upon you. We used to be so much together and were always such good friends. Besides, we are almost relations, are we not? and once I thought we should have been something more. But that is all over now.

“Will you help me? Come to me at once, or write. Lord Bearwarden has left me without a word of explanation except a cruel, cutting, formal letter that I cannot understand. I don't know what I have said or done, but it

seems so hard, so inhuman. And I loved him very dearly, very. Indeed, though you have every right to say you don't believe me, I would have made him a good wife if he had let me. My heart seems quite crushed and broken. It is too hard. Again I ask you to help me, and remain always

“Yours sincerely,

“M. BEARWARDEN.”

There is little doubt that had Dick Stanmore ever received this touching production he would have lost not one moment in complying with the urgency of its appeal. But Dick did not receive it, for the simple reason that, although stamped by her ladyship and placed in the letter-box, it was never sent to the post.

Lord Bearwarden, though absenting himself from home under such unpleasant circumstances, could not therefore shake off the thousand imperceptible meshes that bind a man like chains of iron to his own domestic establishment. Amongst other petty details his

correspondence had to be provided for, and he sent directions accordingly to his groom of the chambers, that all his letters should be forwarded to a certain address. The groom of the chambers, who had served in one or two families before, of which the heads had separated under rather discreditable circumstances, misunderstanding his master's orders, or determined to err on the safe side, forwarded all the letters he could lay hands on to my lord. Therefore the hurt and angry husband was greeted, ere he had left home a day, by the sight of an envelope in his wife's handwriting addressed to the man with whom he believed she was in love. Even under such provocation Lord Bearwarden was too high-minded to open the enclosure, but sent it back forthwith in a slip of paper, on which he calmly "presented his compliments and begged to forward a letter he could see was Lady Bearwarden's that had fallen into his hands by mistake."

Maud, weeping in her desolate home, tore it into a thousand shreds. There was something

characteristic of her husband in these little honourable scruples that cut her to the heart.

“Why didn’t he read it?” she repeated, wringing her hands and walking up and down the room. “He knows Mr. Stanmore quite well. Why didn’t he read it? and then he would have seen what I shall never, never be able to tell him now!”



CHAPTER X.

COAXING A FIGHT.

MR. RYFE could now congratulate himself that his puppets were fairly on the stage prepared for their several parts; and it remained but to bring them into play, and with that view, he summoned all the craft of his experience to assist the cunning of his nature.

Lord Bearwarden, amongst other old-fashioned prejudices, clung to an obsolete notion that there are certain injuries, and those of the deepest and most abiding, for which neither the opinion of society, nor the laws of the land, afford redress, and which can only be wiped out by personal encounter of man to

man. It seemed to him that he could more easily forget his sorrow, and turn with a firmer tread into the beaten track of life, after a snapshot at Mr. Stanmore across a dozen yards of turf. Do not blame him—remember his education and the opinions of those amongst whom he lived. Remember, too, that his crowning sorrow had not yet taught him resignation, an opiate which works only with lapse of time. There is a manlier and a truer courage than that which seeks a momentary oblivion of its wrongs in the excitement of personal danger—there is a heroism of defence, far above the easier valour of attack—and those are distinguished as the bravest troops that under severe loss preserve their discipline and formation, without returning the fire of an enemy.

Lord Bearwarden, however, as became the arm of the service to which he belonged, was impatient of inaction, and had not yet learned to look on hostilities in this light.

“We’ll parade him, Tom,” said he, affecting

a cheerfulness which did not the least deceive his companion. "I don't want to make a row about it, of course. I'll spare *her*, though she hardly deserves it, but I'll have a slap at *him*, and I'll shoot him, too, if I can! You needn't put us up much further than the width of this room!"

They were closeted together at the back of a certain unassuming hotel, where their addresses, if required, would be consistently denied. The room in question was small, gloomy, and uncomfortable, but so shaded and sequestered, that, lulled by its drowsy glimmer, for its inmates, as for the lotus-eaters, "it was always afternoon."

"Suppose he won't fight," observed Tom, shaking his head.

"Won't fight!" repeated his lordship, in high disdain. "Curse him—he *must* fight. I'll horsewhip him in the Park! That's all nonsense, Tom. The fellow 's a gentleman. I'll say that for him. He'll see the propriety of keeping the whole thing quiet, if it was only

out of regard for *her*. You must settle it, Tom. It's a great deal to ask. I know I ought to have gone to a brother-officer, but this is a peculiar case, you see, and the fewer fellows in the hunt the better!"

Mr. Ryfe mused. He didn't much like his job, but reflected that, under the management of any one else, an explanation would assuredly put everything in its true light, and his web would all be brushed away. What he required was a scandal; a slander so well sustained, that Lady Bearwarden's character should never recover it, and for such a purpose nothing seemed so efficacious as a duel, of which she should be the cause. He imagined also, in his inexperience, like the immortal Mr. Winkle, that these encounters were usually bloodless, and mere matters of form.

"You're resolved, I suppose," said Tom. "I needn't point out to you, my lord, that such a course shuts every door to reconciliation—precludes every possibility of things coming right in future. It's a strong measure—a very

strong measure—and you really mean to carry it through?”

“I’ve made up my mind to shoot him,” answered the other, doggedly. “What’s the use of jawing about it? These things should be done at once, my good fellow. If we have to go abroad, we’ll start to-morrow night.”

“I’d better try and hunt him up without delay,” said Tom. “It’s easier to find a fellow now than in the middle of the season, but I might not hit upon him to-night, nevertheless.”

Lord Bearwarden looked at his watch. “Try his club,” said he. “If he dines there, it’s about the time. They’ll know his address at any rate, and if you look sharp you might catch him at home dressing for dinner. I’ll wait here and we’ll have a mutton-chop when you come in. Stick to him, Tom. Don’t let him back out. It would have saved a deal of trouble,” added his lordship, while the other hurried off, “if I could have caught that cab to-day. She’d have been frightened,

though, and upset. Better as it is, perhaps, after all."

Mr. Ryfe did not suffer the wheels of his chariot to tarry, nor the grass to grow beneath his feet. Very few minutes elapsed before he found himself waiting in the strangers' room of a club much affected by Dick Stanmore, comforted with a hall-porter's assurance that the gentleman he sought had ordered dinner, and could not fail to arrive almost immediately. He had scarcely taken up the evening paper when Mr. Stanmore came in.

Anything less like a conscience-stricken Lothario, burdened with the guilt of another man's wife, can scarcely be imagined. Dick's eye was bright, his cheek blooming, his countenance radiant with health, happiness, and the light from within that is kindled by a good conscience and a loving heart. He came up to Ryfe with a merry greeting on his lips, but stopped short, marking the gravity of that gentleman's face and the unusual formality of his bow.

“My errand is a very painful one,” said Tom. “I regret to say, Mr. Stanmore, that I have come to you on a most unpleasant business.”

“I thought you’d come to dinner,” answered Dick, no whit disconcerted. “Never mind. Let’s have it out. I dare say it’s not half so bad as it seems.”

“It could not possibly be worse,” was the solemn rejoinder. “It involves life and honour for two gentlemen, both of whom I respect and esteem. For the sake of one, a very dear friend, I have consented to be here now. Mr. Stanmore, I come to you on behalf of Lord Bearwarden.”

Dick started. The old wound was healed, and, indeed, perfectly cured now, but the skin had not yet grown quite callous over that injured part.

“Go on,” said he. “Why didn’t Lord Bearwarden come himself?”

“Impossible!” answered Tom, with great dignity. “Contrary to all precedent. I could

not have permitted such a thing. Should not have listened to it for a moment. Quite inadmissible. Would have placed every one in a false position. His lordship has lost no time in selecting an experienced friend. May I hope Mr. Stanmore will be equally prompt? You understand me, of course."

"I'm hanged if I *do*!" replied Dick, opening his eyes very wide. "You must speak plainer. What is it all about?"

"Simply," said the other, "that my principal assures me he feels confident your own sense of honour will not permit you to refuse him a meeting. Lord Bearwarden, as you must be aware, Mr. Stanmore, is a man of very high spirit and peculiarly sensitive feelings. You have inflicted on him some injury of so delicate a nature that even from me, his intimate friend, he withholds his confidence on the real facts of the case. He leads me to believe that I shall not find my task very difficult, and my own knowledge of Mr. Stanmore's high character and jealous sense of honour points to the same con-

clusion. You will, of course, meet me half way, without any further negotiation or delay.”

“If he’s ever spoken three words of endearment to ‘the Viscountess,’” reflected Tom, “he’ll understand at once. If he hasn’t, he’ll think I’m mad!”)

“But I can’t fight without I’m told what it’s for,” urged Dick, in considerable bewilderment. “I don’t know Lord Bearwarden well. I’ve nothing to do with him. We’ve never had a quarrel in our lives.”

“Mr. Stanmore!” replied the other. “You surprise me. I thought you quite a different sort of person. I thought a *gentleman*”—here a flash in Dick’s eye warned him not to go too far—“a gentleman of your intelligence would have anticipated my meaning without trying to force from me an explanation, which indeed it is out of my power to make. There *are* injuries, Mr. Stanmore, on which outraged friendship cannot bear to enlarge; for which a man of honour feels bound to offer the only reparation in his power. Must we *force* you,

Mr. Stanmore, into the position we require, by overt measures, as disgraceful to you as they would be unbecoming in my friend?"

"Stop a moment, Mr. Ryfe," said Dick. "Do you speak now for yourself or Lord Bearwarden?"

There was a slight contraction of the lip accompanying this remark that Tom by no means fancied. He hastened to shelter himself behind his principal.

"For Lord Bearwarden, decidedly," said he, "and without intention of the slightest discourtesy. My only object is indeed to avoid, for both parties, anything so revolting as a personal collision. Have I said enough?"

"No, you haven't!" answered Dick, who was getting warm while his dinner was getting cold. "If you won't tell me what the offence is, how can I offer either redress or apology?"

"No apology would be accepted," replied Mr. Ryfe, loftily. "Nor, indeed, does his lordship consider that his injuries admit of extenuation. Shall I tell you his very words,

Mr. Stanmore, addressed to me less than an hour ago?"

"Drive on," said Dick.

"His lordship's words, not my own, you will bear in mind," continued Tom, rather uncomfortable, but resolved to play out his trump card. "And I only repeat them as it were in confidence, and at your own request. 'Tom,' said he, 'nothing on earth shall prevent our meeting. No. Not if I have to horsewhip Mr. Stanmore in the Park to bring it about.'"

"If that don't fetch him," thought Tom, "he's not the man I take him for."

It *did* fetch him. Dick started, and turned fiercely on the speaker.

"The devil!" he exclaimed. "Two can play at that game, and perhaps he might come off the worst! Mr. Ryfe, you're a bold man to bring such a message to *me*. I'm not sure how far your character of ambassador should bear you harmless; but, in the mean time, tell your principal I'll accommodate him with pleasure, and the sooner the better."

Dick's blood was up, as indeed seemed natural enough under so gross an insult, and he was all for fighting now, right or wrong. Tom Ryfe congratulated himself on the success of this, his first step in a diplomacy leading to war, devoutly hoping that the friend to whom Mr. Stanmore should refer him might prove equally fierce and hot-headed. He bowed with the studied courtesy assumed by every man concerned, either as principal or second in an act of premeditated homicide, and smoothed his hat preparatory to taking leave.

"If you will kindly favour me with your friend's name," said he, in a tone of excessive suavity, "I will wish you good-evening. I fear I have already kept you too long from dinner."

Dick considered for a few seconds, while he ran over in his mind the sum total of intimates on whom he could rely in an emergency like the present. It is wonderful how short such lists are. Mr. Stanmore could not recall more than half a dozen, and of these four were out

of town, and one lay ill in bed. The only available man of the six was Simon Perkins. Dick Stanmore knew that he could trust him to act as a stanch friend through thick and thin, but he had considerable scruples in availing himself of the painter's assistance under existing circumstances.

Time pressed, however, and there was nothing for it but to furnish Mr. Ryfe with Simon's name and address in Berners Street.

"Can I see him at once?" asked Tom, strangely anxious to hasten matters, as it seemed to Dick Stanmore, who could not help wondering whether, had the visitor been a combatant, he would have proved equally eager for the fray.

"I am afraid not till to-morrow," was the reply. "He has left his painting-room by this time and gone out of town. I cannot ask you to take another journey to-night. Allow me to offer you a glass of sherry before you go."

Tom declined the proffered hospitality, bowing himself out, as befitted the occasion,

with much ceremonious politeness, and leaving the other to proceed to his club-dinner in a frame of mind that considerably modified the healthy appetite he had brought with him half an hour ago.

He congratulated himself, however, before his soup was done, that he had not sent Mr. Ryfe down to the cottage at Putney. He could not bear to think of that peaceful, happy retreat, the nest of his dove, the home of his heart, as desecrated by such a presence on such an errand. "Come what might," he thought, "Nina must be kept from all terrors and anxieties of this kind—all knowledge of such wild, wicked doings as these."

So thinking, and reflecting, also, that it was very possible with an encounter of so deadly a nature before him they might never meet again, he knew too well by the heaviness at his heart how dear this girl had become in so short a time—how completely she had filled up that gaping wound in his affections from which he once thought he must have bled hopelessly to

death; how entirely he was bound up in her happiness, and how, even in an hour of trouble, danger, and vexation like this, his chief anxiety was lest it should bring sorrow and suffering to *her*.

He drank but little wine at his solitary dinner, smoked one cigar after it, and wrote a long letter to Nina before he went to bed—a letter in which he told her all his love, all the comfort she had been to him, all his past sorrows, all his future hopes, and then tore this affectionate production into shreds and flung it in the fireplace. It had only been meant to reach her hands if he should be killed. And was it not calculated, then, to render her more unhappy, more inconsolable? He asked himself the question several times before he found resolution to answer it in the practical manner described. I think he must have been very fond of Nina Algernon indeed, although he did not the least know she was at that moment looking out of window, with her hair down, listening to the night breeze in the poplars, the

lap and wash of the ebb-tide against the river-banks, thinking how nice it was to have met him that morning, by the merest accident, how nice it would be to see him in the painting-room, by the merest accident again, of course, to-morrow afternoon.

The clock at St. George's, Hanover Square, struck nine as Mr. Ryfe returned to his hotel. He found Lord Bearwarden waiting for him, and dinner ready to be placed on the table.

"Have you settled it?" asked his lordship, in a fierce whisper that betrayed no little eagerness for action—something very like a thirst for blood. "When is it for, Tom? To-morrow morning? I've got everything ready. I don't know that we need cross the water, after all."

"Easy, my lord," answered Tom. "I can't get on quite so quick as you wish. I've seen our man, and learned his friend's name and address. That's pretty well, I think, for one day's work."

"You'll meet the friend to-night, Tom!"

exclaimed the other. "Who is he? Do we know him? He's a soldier, I hope?"

"He's a painter, and he lives out of town; so I *can't* see him till to-morrow. In the meantime, I would venture to suggest, my lord, that I'm recovering from a severe illness, and I've been eight hours without food."

Tom spoke cheerily enough, but in good truth he looked haggard and out-worn. Lord Bearwarden rang the bell.

"I'm ashamed of myself," said he. "Let's have dinner directly; and as for this cursed business, don't let us think any more about it till to-morrow morning."

They sat down accordingly to good food, well-cooked, good wine, well-decanted: in good society, too, well chosen from a select fraternity usually to be found in this secluded resort. So they feasted, and were merry, talking of hounds, horses, hunting, racing, weight for age, wine, women, and what-not. The keenest observer, the acutest judge of his kind, could never have detected that one of these men was meditating

bloodshed, the other prompting him to something very like murder as an accessory before the fact.

I will never believe that Damocles ate his supper with less appetite, drank his wine with less zest, for the threatening sword suspended overhead.



CHAPTER XI.

BAFFLED.

MR. RYFE, we may be sure, did not fail to make his appearance in Berners Street at an early hour on the following day, as soon indeed as, according to Mr. Stanmore's information, there was any chance of finding the painter at home. He felt, and he told himself so more than once, that he was enacting the part of Mephistopheles, without the supernatural power of that fatal auxiliary, without even a fair allowance of time to lure his Faust to perdition. He had undertaken a task that never would have occurred but to a desperate

man, and Tom was desperate, inasmuch as the one hope on which he set his heart had crumbled to atoms. He had resolved to bring together in active hostility two men of the world, versed in the usages of society, themselves perfectly familiar with the code of social honour, that they might attempt each other's lives beguiled by a delusion gross and palpable as the common tricks of any fire-eating conjuror at a fair.

The very audacity of the scheme, however, seemed to afford its best chance of success, and when that success should have been attained, Tom's fancy, overleaping all intermediate difficulties, revelled in the wild possibilities of the future. Of bloodshed he took very little thought. What cared he, with his sad, sore heart, for the lives of those prosperous men, gifted with social advantages that had been denied to himself, and that he felt a proud consciousness he could have put to a far richer profit? Whether either or both were killed, whether either or both came home untouched,

his object would equally be gained. Lady Bearwarden's fair fame would equally be dishonoured before the world. He knew that world well, knew its tyrannical code, its puzzling verdicts, its unaccountable clemency to the wolf, its inflexible severity for the lamb, above all, its holy horror of a blot that has been scored, of a sin, then only unpardonable, that has been "found out."

Men love the women on whom they set their affections so differently. For some—and these are great favourites with the sex—attachment means the desire of a tiger for its prey. With others it is the gratification a child finds in a toy. A small minority entertain the superstition of a savage for his idol; a smaller yet offer the holy homage of a true worshipper to his saint. A woman's heart pines for unrivalled sovereignty—a woman's nature requires the strong hand of a master to retain it in bondage. For this, as for every other earthly state, there is no unalloyed happiness, no perfect enjoyment, no complete

repose. The gourd has its worm, the diamond its flaw, the rose its earwigs, and

“ The trail of the serpent is over them all.”

So Tom Ryfe, taking time by the forelock, breakfasted at ten, wrote several letters with considerable coolness and forethought, all bearing on the event in contemplation, some providing for a week's absence abroad, at least, smoked a cigar in Lord Bearwarden's bedroom, who was not yet up, and towards noon turned out of Oxford Street to fulfil his mission with Simon Perkins the painter.

His step was lighter, his whole appearance more elate, than usual. The traces of recent illness and overnight's fatigue had disappeared. He was above all foolish fancies of luck, presentiments, and such superstitions—a man not easily acted on by extraneous circumstances of good or evil, trusting chiefly in his own resources, and believing very firmly in nothing but the multiplication table; yet to-day he told himself he “felt like a winner;” to-day

victory seemed in his grasp, and he trod the pavement with the confident port of that pride which the proverb warns us "goeth before a fall."

He rang the door-bell and was vaguely directed to proceed upstairs by the nondescript maid-servant who admitted him. The place was dark, the day sultry, the steps numerous. Tom climbed them leisurely, hat in hand, wondering why people couldn't live on the ground-floor, and not a little absorbed in preparation of such a plausible tale as should bring the contemplated interview to a warlike termination.

Turning imaginary periods with certain grandiloquent phrases concerning delicacy of feeling and high sense of honour, he arrived at the second landing, where he paused to take breath. Tom's illness had no doubt weakened his condition, but the gasp with which he now opened his mouth denoted excess of astonishment rather than deficiency of wind.

Spinning deftly into its place, as if dropped

from heaven with a plumb-line, a wreath of artificial flowers landed lightly on his temples, while a woman's laugh, soft and silvery, accompanied with its pleasant music this unexpected coronation.

Tom looked up aghast, but he was not quick enough to catch sight of more than the hem of a garment, the turn of an ankle. There was a smothered exclamation, a "my gracious!" denoting extremity of dismay, a rustle of skirts, the loud bang of a door, and all became still. "Deuced odd," thought Tom, removing the wreath and wondering where he should put it, before he made his entrance. "Queer sort of people these! Painter a regular Don Giovanni, no doubt. So much the better—all the more likely to go in for the fuss and *éclat* of a duel."

So Tom flung his garland aside and prepared to assume a lofty presence with his hand on the painting-room door, while Nina, blushing to the roots of her hair, barricaded herself carefully into a small dressing-closet opening on the studio, in which retreat it was Simon's habit

to wash his hands and smarten himself up when he had done work for the day.

Poor Nina! To use her own expression, she was "horrified." She expected Dick Stanmore, and with a girlish playfulness sufficiently denoting the terms on which they stood, had been lying in wait at the top of the stairs, preparing to take a good shot, and drop the wreath, one of Simon's faded properties, on that head which she now loved better than all the world besides.

The staircase, I have said, was gloomy. Young gentlemen all brush their hair the same way. The missile was out of her fingers ere a horrid suspicion crossed her that she had made a mistake; and when Tom looked up there was nothing for it but *sauve qui peut!* After all, one head, perhaps, also, one heart, is very like another; but Nina had not yet mastered this, the first element of a rational philosophy, and would have fled, if she could, to the ends of the earth.

In the mean time she took refuge in the

little room off the studio, blushing, palpitating, very much ashamed, though more than half amused, but firmly resolved not to leave her hiding-place nor face the visitor, devoutly hoping, at the same time, that he might not stay long.

Simon was in the act of lifting his Fairy Queen into her usual position. She had been dethroned the day before, while he worked at a less congenial task. On his visitor's entrance he put her back with her face to the wall.

Tom made an exceedingly stiff bow. "Mr. Perkins, I believe?"

"Mr. Ryfe?" replied Simon, in the same half-interrogative tone, with a very stiff bow too.

"I am here on the part of Lord Bearwarden," said Tom. "And I have been referred to you by Mr. Stanmore. You expected me, no doubt."

"I had a communication from Mr. Stanmore an hour ago to that effect," answered Simon, with a gravity the more profound that he had

some difficulty in repressing a smile. The painter was not without a sense of humour, and this "communication," as he called it, lay crumpled up in his waistcoat-pocket while he spoke. It ran thus:—

“DEAR SIMON,—I have had a visit from a man named Ryfe that puzzles me exceedingly. He comes from Lord Bearwarden, and they want to fasten some sort of quarrel on me, but why, I cannot imagine. I was obliged to refer him to you. Of course we'll fight if we must; but try and make out what they are driving at, and which is the biggest fool of the two. I think they're both mad! I shall be with you rather later than usual. In the mean time I leave the whole thing in your hands. I don't know Bearwarden well, but used to think him rather a good fellow. The other's an *awful* snob!”

Now I feel that it would be unbecoming on my part to tax a young lady with so mean an

act as that of listening ; nevertheless, each of the gentlemen in the studio thought proper to speak in so loud and indeed so pompous a voice that Miss Algernon could not avoid overhearing them. It was surely natural, then, that when Mr. Stanmore's name was brought into the colloquy she should have drawn nearer the door of partition, and—well—not *tried* to avoid overhearing as much as possible of their dialogue.

The action of the farce amused her at first. It was soon to become interesting, exciting, terrible, even to the verge of tragedy.

“That makes my task easier,” continued Mr. Ryfe. “He has explained, of course, the tendency of my instructions, the object of my visit. It only remains for us to fix time and place.”

“He has explained *nothing*,” answered the painter. “What is it you complain of, and of what nature is the dispute between Lord Bearwarden and my friend?”

Tom assumed an air of extreme candour,

and opened his case artfully enough; but, forgetting that every painter is necessarily a physiognomist, omitted the precaution of turning his back to the light.

“You are on intimate terms with Mr. Stanmore, I believe,” said he. “Yet in matters of so delicate a nature men of honour keep their own counsel very closely. It is possible you may not be aware of much in his daily life that you would disapprove—much that, under the circumstances, though I am no rigid moralist, appears inexcusable even to me.”

How white that delicate face turned in the next room! How eagerly those dark eyes seemed trying to pierce the blank panels of the door!

“I have known Mr. Stanmore several years,” answered the painter. “I have seen him almost every day of late. I can only say you must be more explicit, Mr. Ryfe. I do not understand you yet.”

“Do you mean to tell me you are ignorant of an entanglement, a *liaison*, a most untoward

and unfortunate attachment, existing between Mr. Stanmore and a lady whose name I fear it will be impossible to keep out of the discussion?"

A wild misgiving, not altogether painful, shot through the painter while he thought of Nina; but, watching the speaker's face, as was his wont, and detecting a disparity of expression between eyes and mouth, he gathered that the man was trying to deceive him in some particular—not speaking the whole truth.

Miss Algernon, who could only listen, trembled and turned sick at heart.

"I think you must be misinformed, Mr. Ryfe," was Simon's reply.

The other smiled, as pitying such ignorance of social gossip and worldly scandal.

"Misinformed!" he repeated. "A man is not usually misinformed who trusts his own eyes. A husband cannot be called unreasonably dissatisfied whose wife tells him distinctly she is going to one place, and who sees her an hour after in company with the man he suspects at

another. It is no use beating about the bush. You cannot ignore such outrages as these. I wish to spare everybody's feelings—yours, mine, even the lady's, and, above all, my poor friend's ; but I must tell you, point-blank, that the intimacy which I have reason to believe existed between Mr. Stanmore and Lady Bearwarden has not been discontinued since her marriage ; and I come to *you*, as that gentleman's friend, on Lord Bearwarden's behalf, to demand the only reparation that can be made for such injuries from man to man."

The painter opened his eyes, and Tom told himself he had made a good speech, very much to the point. Neither gentleman heard a faint moan in the next room, the cry of a gentle heart wounded to the quick.

"You mean they ought to fight," said Simon, still scrutinizing the expression of the other's face.

"Precisely," answered Tom. "We must go abroad, I fancy, for all our sakes. Can you be ready to start to-night ? Tidal train, you know

—nice weather for crossing—breakfast the other side—*demi-poulet* and bottle of moderate St. Jullien—needn't stop long for that—Belgian frontier by the middle of the day—no sort of difficulty when once you're across the water. Shall I say to-morrow afternoon, somewhere in the neighbourhood of Mouscron? We can all go together, for that matter, and arrange the exact spot in ten minutes."

Tom spoke as if they were planning a picnic, with nothing whatever to dread but the chance of rain.

"Stop a moment," said the painter. "Not quite so fast, if you please. This is a matter of life and death. We can't settle it in five minutes, and as many words. You call yourself a man of the world, Mr. Ryfe, and, doubtless, have some familiarity with affairs of this kind, either from experience or hearsay. Do you seriously believe I am going to put my friend up as a target for yours to shoot at without some more definite information, some fuller explanation than you seem inclined to give?"

Lady Bearwarden has not left her home. My friend has been here every day of late with the utmost regularity. It seems impossible that Lord Bearwarden's suspicions can be well grounded. There must be some mistake, some misconception. Over-haste in a matter like this would be irrevocable, and ruinous to everybody concerned."

Nina was listening with all her might. Every word of Tom's answer sunk into her heart.

"My friend has left *his* home," said he, in a voice of assumed feeling. "I was at luncheon with them just before the disclosure took place. A happier couple you never saw. Lately married—new furniture—wedding-presents all over the place—delightful house, overlooking the Park. This paradise is now completely broken up. I confess I feel strongly on the subject. I know his lordship intimately. I can appreciate his good qualities. I have also the honour of Lady Bearwarden's acquaintance. The whole affair is extremely painful even to *me*, but I have a duty to perform and I

must go through with it. Mr. Perkins, we are wasting time, let us come to the main point at once."

Simon pondered for a minute, during which he made another narrow scrutiny of Tom Ryfe's face. Then he said, in the tone of a man who comes to a final decision, "I suppose you are right. I fear there is but one way out of it."

It did not escape the painter that, notwithstanding his obvious self-command, the other's countenance brightened far more than was natural at this admission. A duel in these days is a very serious matter to every one concerned, and why should this man seem so truly rejoiced at the progress of an affair that might put his own neck in danger of a halter?

Simon's natural shrewdness, of which, in common with many other simple-minded persons, he possessed a considerable share, warned him there was something more here than appeared at first sight—some mystery of which time alone was likely to afford the elucidation. Time he resolved accordingly to

gain, and that without putting the other on his guard.

“But one way out of it,” he repeated, gravely. “I wish indeed it could be arranged otherwise. Still this is a serious matter—quite out of my usual line—I cannot undertake anything decided without advice, nor entirely on my own responsibility. My intention is to consult with a friend, an old military man. You shall have my definite answer in a day or two at furthest.”

Again watching Mr. Ryfe’s face, Simon observed it cloud with dissatisfaction, and his suspicions were confirmed. This fire-eater was evidently only anxious to hurry on the duel with unseemly haste, and make the principals fight at all risks.

“We object to delay,” he exclaimed, “we object to publicity. The thing is plain enough as it stands. You will only complicate it by bringing others into council, and in such a case, surely, the fewer people aware of our intentions the better.”

“I cannot help that,” answered the painter, in a tone of decision. “My mind is made up, and I see my way clearly enough. You shall have our answer within forty-eight hours at furthest. I repeat, this is a matter in which I will not move an inch without the utmost certainty.”

Tom began to lose his temper. “Your scruples will bring about a flagrant scandal,” he exclaimed. “Lord Bearwarden is determined not to be cheated out of his redress. I know his intentions, and I know his character. There will be a personal collision, to the disgrace of every one concerned!”

“Then I shall recommend Stanmore to walk about with a thick stick,” answered Simon, coolly. “I often carry one myself, Mr. Ryfe,” he added, in a tone of marked significance, “and should not scruple to use it on occasion to the best of my abilities.”

The painter, though a small, slight man, was utterly fearless. Looking Tom Ryfe straight in the eyes while he made this suggestive ob-

servation, the latter felt that nothing was to be gained by bullying, and the game was lost.

“I am surprised,” he replied, loftily, but with a ceremonious bow, as reminding the other that his character of ambassador was sacred. “I am disappointed. I wash my hands of the disagreeable results likely to arise from this unfortunate delay. I wish you good-morning, Mr. Perkins. I leave you my address, and I trust you will lose no time in making me acquainted with the result of your deliberations.”

So Tom walked down stairs with great dignity, though he smothered more than one bitter curse the while, passing without so much as a glance the rejected garland, lying where he had thrown it aside before he entered on his unsuccessful mission.

Had he been a little less stately in manner, a little more rapid of movement, he might have overtaken the very lady of whom he obtained a glimpse during his ascent. Nina Algernon was but a few paces ahead of him,

scouring along at a speed only accomplished by those who feel that goad in the heart which stimulates exertion, far more effectually than the "spur in the head," proverbially supposed to be worth "two in the heels." Nina had overheard enough from her hiding-place to make her angry, unhappy, and anxious in the highest degree. Angry, first of all, with herself and him, to think that she could have set her affections on one who was untrue; unhappy, to feel she still cared for him so much; anxious to gather from the cold-blooded courtesies of the odious Mr. Ryfe that a life so dear to her was in danger, that perhaps she might never see Dick Stanmore again. With this ghastly consideration, surged up fuller than ever the tide of love that had been momentarily obstructed, forcing her into action, and compelling her to take immediate steps for ascertaining his perfidy, while, at the same time, she warded off from him the penalties it entailed.

"He'll know I love him then," thought poor

Nina. "But I'll never see him, nor speak to him, again—never—never. How *could* he? I wonder why men are so bad!"

To this end, acting on an impulse as unreasonable as it was essentially feminine, she resolved to seek Lady Bearwarden without delay, and throwing herself on the mercy of that formidable rival, implore advice and assistance for the safety of the man they both loved.

So she fled down stairs, and was out of the house like a lapwing, just as Tom Ryfe's warlike colloquy with the painter came to a close.

Simon, missing her, after he had taken leave of his visitor, was not therefore disturbed nor alarmed by her absence. He accounted for it on the very natural supposition that she had met Dick Stanmore at the door, and pressed him into her service to act as convoy in some shopping expedition, before she sat down to her daily duty as a model for the Fairy Queen, now completed, all but a few folds of drapery, and a turn of the white hand.

Till she came back, however, the great work must remain at a standstill, and Simon had leisure to reflect on his late conversation with Mr. Ryfe, which astonished and perplexed him exceedingly.

Neither his astonishment, nor his perplexity, were decreased, to learn, on Dick's arrival, that he had no knowledge of Miss Algernon's movements—had not met her—had not seen her since yesterday, certainly expected to find her here, and was to the full as anxious and uncomfortable as the painter himself.

“This other business will keep cold,” said Dick, in a great heat and fuss. “I don't care whether it will or not. It *must!* But we can't have Miss Algernon wandering about London by herself. We can't, at least *I* can't, be easy a moment till I know what has become of her. You stay here, Simon, in case she should come back. After all, she may be shopping in the next street. I'll rush down to Putney at once, and find out if she's gone home. Don't be afraid. I won't alarm the

old ladies. If she's not there I'll be back immediately. If she comes in while I'm gone, wait for me, or leave a line. Old man, if anything goes wrong with that darling, I—I've nothing left to live for in the world!"

Even while he spoke, he was on the stairs, and Simon, left in the painting-room, shook his head, and pondered.

"They'll never make me believe that cock-and-bull story about Lady Bearwarden. Ah, Nina! I begin to think this man loves you almost as well as I could have done!"



CHAPTER XII.

BLINDED.

TOM RYFE, walking down Berners Street in the worst of humours, saw the whole game he had been playing slipping out of his hands. If there were to be no duel, all the trouble he had taken went for nothing; and even should there be an unseemly *fracas*, and should a meeting afterwards take place between Lord Bearwarden and Dick Stanmore, what good would it do him, if her ladyship's name were kept out of the quarrel? How he cursed this cockney painter's resolution and good sense! How he longed for some fierce encounter, some desperate measure, something, no matter

what, that should bring affairs to a crisis! It seemed so silly, so childlike, to be baffled now. Yes, he had set his heart on Lady Bearwarden. The great master-passion of his life had gone on gathering and growing till it became, as such master-passions will, when there is neither honour nor religion to check them, a fury, over which he had lost all control. And he felt that, having gone so far, there was no crime, no outrage, he would shrink from committing, to obtain what he desired now.

When a man is thus ripe for evil he seldom wants opportunity. It must be admitted the devil never throws a chance away. Open your hand, and ere you can close it again, he slips a tool in, expressly adapted for the purpose you design—a tool that, before you have done with it, you may be sure, will cut your own fingers to the bone.

“Beg pardon, sir, can I speak of you for a minute?” said a gaudily-dressed, vulgar-looking personage, crossing the street to accost Tom Ryfe as he emerged from the painter’s house.

“It’s about a lady. About her ladyship, askin’ your pardon. Lady Bearwarden, you know.”

That name was a talisman to arrest Tom’s attention. He looked his man over from head to foot, and thought he had never seen a more ruffianly bearing, a wilder, sadder face.

“Come up this bye-street,” said he. “Speak out—I’ll keep your counsel, and I’ll pay you well. That’s what you mean, I suppose. That’s business. What about Lady Bearwarden?”

The man cursed her deeply, bitterly, ere he replied—“I know *you*, sir, an’ so I ought to, though you don’t know *me*. Mr. Ryfe, I seen you in Belgrave Square, along of *her*. You was a courtin’ of her then. You owes her more than one good turn now, or I’m mistaken!”

“Who the devil are you?” asked Tom, startled, and with reason; yet conscious, in his dark, dreary despair, of a vague glimmer, bearing the same relation to hope that a will-o’-the-wisp does to the light on our hearth at home.

The man looked about him. That narrow street was deserted but for themselves.

He stared in Tom's face with a certain desperate frankness. "I'll tell ye who I am," said he; "if you an' me is to go in for this job, as true pals, let's have no secrets between us, an' bear no malice. They call me 'Gentleman Jim,' Mr. Ryfe, that's what they call *me*. I'm the man as hocussed you that there arternoon, down Westminster way. I was set on to that job, I was. Set on by *her*. I squeezed hard, I know. All in the way o' business. But I might have squeezed *harder*, Mr. Ryfe. You should think o' that!"

"You infernal scoundrel!" exclaimed Tom, yet in a tone neither so astonished nor so indignant as his informant expected. "If you had, you'd have been hanged for murder. Well, it's not *you* I ought to blame. What have you got to say? You can help me—I see it in your face. Out with it. You speak to a man as desperate as yourself."

"I knowed it!" exclaimed the other.

“When you come out o’ that there house, I seen it in the way as you slammed to that there door. Says I, there’s the man as I wants, an’ the man as wants me! I follered you this mornin’ from your hotel, an’ a precious job I had keepin’ up with your hansom, though the driver, as works by times with a pal o’ mine, he kep’ on easy when he could. I watched of the house, ah! an hour an’ more, an’ I never turned my head away but to get a drop o’ beer from a lad as I sent round to the Grapes for a quart. Bless ye! I hadn’t but just emptied the pot, when I see a lady—the very moral of her as we knows on—pops round the corner into Oxford Street. I was in two minds whether to foller, but thinks I, it’s Mr. Ryfe as I’m a-lookin’ for, an’ if it *was* she, we couldn’t trap her now, not in a crowded place like that. Besides, I see a servant-gal takin’ home the beer drop her a curtesy as she went by. No, it couldn’t be my lady; but if so be as you an’ me is of the same mind, Mr. Ryfe, my lady shall be safe in a cage afore this time

to-morrow, and never a man to keep the key but yourself, Mr. Ryfe, if you'll only be guided by a true friend."

"Who set you on to this?" asked Tom, coolly enough, considering that his blood was boiling with all the worst and fiercest passions of his nature. "What do *you* expect to gain from injury inflicted on" (he could not get the name out)—"on the lady you mention?"

Jim laughed—a harsh, grating laugh. "You're a deep 'un, Mr. Ryfe!" he answered. "I won't deceive you. I put this here in your way because there's two things as I must have to work the job as I ain't got. One's money, and t'other's gumption. I ain't rich enough, an' I ain't h'artful enough. I owe my lady a turn, too, never you mind what for, and strike me dead but I'll pay it up! I aint a-going to say as I wouldn't ha' worked this here off, clear, single-handed, if I'd had the chance. I'm not telling you a lie, Mr. Ryfe; you and me can do it together, an' I'll only charge you fair and reasonable. Ah! not half what you'd

take an' offer this minute if I was to stand out for a price."

Tom Ryfe turned round, put both hands on the other's shoulders, and laughed too.

"We understand each other," said he. "Never mind the price. If the work's done to please me, I'm not likely to grudge the money. You've some plan in your head by which you think we can both gain what we most desire. I know you're a resolute fellow. Hang it! my throat's still sore where you got that cursed grip of yours inside my collar. You can believe I'm not easily thwarted, or I should hardly be here now. Explain yourself. Let me know your plan. If it is anything like practicable, you and I ought to be able to carry it out."

Then Jim, not without circumlocution and many hideous oaths, detailed in his hearer's willing ears the scheme he had in view. He proposed, with Mr. Ryfe's assistance, to accomplish no less flagrant an outrage than the forcible abduction of Lady Bearwarden from her

home. He suggested that his listener, of whose skill in penmanship he entertained a high opinion, should write such a letter as might lure her ladyship into a lonely, ill-lighted locality, not far from her own door ; and Tom, appreciating the anxiety she must now feel about her husband's movements, saw no difficulty in the accomplishment of such a stratagem. This desperate couple were then to be ready with a four-wheeled cab, a shawl, and a cleverly-constructed gag, in which screaming was impossible. Tom should enact the part of driver, while Jim, being the stronger man of the two, should seize and pinion her ladyship in his grasp. Mute and muffled, she was to be forced into the cab, which could then be driven off to that very lodging in the purlieus of Westminster which Tom knew, by his own experiences, was far removed from assistance or inquiry. Once in Mr. Ryfe's hands, Jim observed, the captive would only be too glad to make terms, and arrangements for taking her out of London down the river,

or in any other direction, could be entered into at leisure. Mr. Ryfe surely would not require more than twelve hours to come to an understanding with a lady irrevocably in his power. And all the while, deep in this bold villain's breast lurked a dark, fierce, terrible reflection that one more crime, only one more—almost, indeed, an act of wild retributive justice on his confederate—and that proud, tameless woman would be crouching in the dust, praying for mercy at the feet of the desperate man she had reviled and despised.

Gentleman Jim, maddened by a course of dram-drinking, blinded by an infatuation that itself constituted insanity, was hardly to be considered an accountable being. It may be that under the mass of guilt and impurity with which his whole being was loaded, there glimmered some faint spark of manlier and worthier feeling; it may be, that he entertained some vague notion of appearing before the high-born lady in the light of

a preserver, with the blood of the smoother and more polished scoundrel on his hands, and of setting her free, while he declared his hopeless, his unalterable devotion, sealed by the sacrifice of two lives, for, as he often expressed it in imaginary conversations with his idol, "he asked no better than to swing for her sake!"

Who knows? Fanaticism has its martyrs, like religion. It is not only the savage heathen who run under Juggernaut every day. Diseased brains, corrupt hearts, and impossible desires go far to constitute aberration of intellect. Unreasoning love, and unlimited liquor, will make a man fool enough for anything.

Tom Ryfe listened well pleased. For him there was neither the excuse of drink nor despair, yet he, too, entertained some notion of home and happiness hereafter, when she found nobody in the world to turn to but himself, and had forgiven him her wrongs because of the tenacity with which he clung to her in spite of all.

Of his friend, and the position he must leave him in, he made no account.

Something very disagreeable came across him, indeed, when he thought of Lord Bearwarden's resolute character—his practical notions concerning the redress of injury or insult; but all such apprehensions were for the future. The present must be a time of action. If only to-night's *coup de main* should come off successfully, he might cross the Atlantic with his prey, and remain in safe seclusion till the outrage had been so far forgotten by the public that those at home whom it most affected would be unwilling to rekindle the embers of a scandal half-smothered and dying out. Tom Ryfe was not without ready money. He calculated he could live for at least a year in some foreign clime, far beyond the western wave, luxuriously enough. A year! With *her*! Why it seemed an eternity; and even in that moment his companion was wondering, half-stupidly, how Mr. Ryfe would look with his throat cut, or his head laid open, weltering

in blood; and when and where it would be advisable to put this finishing stroke of murder and perfidy to the crimes he meditated to-night.

Ere these confederates parted, however, two letters had to be written in a stationer's shop. They were directed by the same pen, though apparently in different handwritings, to Lord and Lady Bearwarden at their respective addresses.

The first was as follows—

“DEAR LORD BEARWARDEN,—

“They won't fight! All sorts of difficulties have been made, and even if we can obtain a meeting at last, it must be after considerable delay. In the meantime I have business of my own which forces me to leave town for four-and-twenty hours at least. If possible, I will look you up before I start. If not, send a line to the office. I shall find it on my return: these matters complicate themselves as they go on, but I still venture to hope

you may leave the conduct of the present affair with perfect safety in my hands, and I remain, with much sympathy,

“Your lordship’s obedient servant,

“THOMAS RYFE.”

The second, though a very short production, took longer time, both in composition and penmanship. It was written purposely on a scrap of paper from which the stationer’s name and the water-mark had been carefully torn off. It consisted but of these lines.

“A cruel mystery has deprived you of your husband. You have courage. Walk out to-night at eight, fifty yards from your own door. Turn to the right—I will meet you and explain all.

“My reputation is at stake. I trust you as one woman trusts another. Seek to learn no more.”

“That will bring her,” thought Tom, “for she fears nothing!” and he sealed the letter

with a dab of black wax flattened by the impression of the woman's thimble, who kept the shop.

There was a Court Guide on the counter. Tom Ryfe knew Lady Bearwarden's address as well as his own, yet from a methodical and lawyer-like habit of accuracy, seeing that it lay open at the letter B, he glanced his eye, and ran his finger down the page to stop at the very bottom, and thus verify, as it were, his own recollection of his lordship's number, ere he paid for the paper and walked away to post his letters in company with Jim, who waited outside.

The stationer, fitting shelves in his back shop, was a man of observation and some eccentricity.

"Poll," said he to his wife, "it's an uncertain business, is the book-trade. A Court Guide hasn't been asked for over that counter, no, not for six months, and here's two parties come in and look at it in a morning. There's nothing goes off, to depend on, but hymns. Both of 'em wanted the same address, I do believe, for I took notice each stopped in the

same column at the very foot. Nothing escapes me, lass! However, that isn't no business of yours nor mine."

The wife, a woman of few words and abrupt demeanour, made a pounce at the Court Guide to put it back in its place, but her "master," as she somewhat inconsequently called him, interposed.

"Let it be, lass!" said he. "There's luck in odd numbers, they say. Who knows but we mayn't have a third party come in on the same errand? Let it be, and go make the toast. It's getting on for tea-time, and the fire in the back parlour's nearly out."

When these letters were posted, the confederates, feeling themselves fairly embarked on their joint scheme, separated to advance each his own share of the contemplated enormity. Tom Ryfe jumped into a cab, and was off on a multiplicity of errands, while Jim, pondering deeply with his head down, and his hands thrust into his coat pockets, slunk towards Holborn, revolving in his mind the least he could offer some

dissipated cabman, whose license was in danger at any rate, for the hire of horse and vehicle during the ensuing night.

Feeling his sleeve plucked feebly from behind, he broke off these meditations, to turn round with a savage oath.

What a dreary face was that which met his arm! Pale and gaunt, with the hollow eyes that denote bodily suffering, and the deep cruel lines that speak of mental care. What a thin wasted hand was laid on his burly arm, in its velveteen sleeve; and what a weak faint voice in trembling accents, urged its sad, wistful prayer.

“Speak to me, Jim—won’t you speak to me, dear? I’ve looked for you day and night, and followed you mile after mile till I’m ready to lie down and die here on the cold stones.”

“Bother!” replied Jim, shaking himself free. “I’m busy, I tell ye. What call had you, I should like to know, to be tracking, and hunting of me about, as if I was a—well—a fancy dog we’ll say, as had strayed out of a

parlour? Go home, I tell ye, or it'll be the worse for ye!"

"You don't love me no more, Jim!" said the woman. There was a calm sadness in her voice speaking of that resignation which is but the apathy of despair.

"Well—I don't. There!" replied Jim, acceding to this proposition with great promptitude.

"But you can't keep me off of loving *you*, Jim," she replied, with a wild stare; "nobody can't keep me off of that. Won't ye think better of it, old man?" Give us one chance more, that's a good chap. It's for dear life I'm askin'!"

She had wound both hands round his arm, and was hanging to it with all her weight. How light a burthen it seemed, to which those limp rags clung so shabbily, compared with the substantial frame he remembered in former days, when Dorothea was honest, hardworking, and happy.

"It ain't o' no use tryin' on of these here

games," said he, unclasping the poor weak hands with brutal force. "Come! I can't stop all day. Shut up, I tell ye! you'll wish you had by-and-by."

"Oh! Jim," she pleaded. "Is it come to this? Never say it, dear. If you and me is to part in anger now we'll not meet again. Leastways, not on this earth. And if it's true, as I was taught at Sunday-school, heaven's too good a place for *us!*"

"Go to h—ll!" exclaimed the ruffian furiously; and he flung her from him with a force that would have brought her to the ground had she not caught at the street railings for support.

She moaned and sat down on a doorstep a few paces off, without looking up.

For a moment Jim's heart smote him, and he thought to turn back, but in his maddened brain there rose a vision of the pale, haughty face, the queenly bearing, the commanding gestures that bade him kneel to worship, and with another oath—remorseless, pitiless, un-

touched, and unrepentant—he passed on to his iniquity.

Dorothea sat with head bent down, and hands clasped about her knees, unconscious, as it seemed, of all the world outside. The heart knoweth its own bitterness, and who shall say what expiation she may not have made for sin in that dull trance of pain which took no note of circumstance, kept no count of time?

Ere long, a policeman, good-humoured but imperative, touched her on the shoulder, and bade her “move on.”

The face that looked up to him puzzled this functionary extremely. The woman was sober enough, he could see, and yet there seemed something queer about her, uncommon queer: he was blessed if he knew what to make of her, and he had been a goodish time in the force, too!

She thanked him very quietly. She had been taking a rest, she said, thinking no harm, for she was tired, and now she would go home. Yes, she was dead-tired, she had better go home!

Wrapping her faded shawl about her, she glided on, instinctively avoiding the jostling of foot-passengers and the trampling of horses, proceeding at an even, leisurely pace, with something of the sleep-walker's wandering step and gestures. The roll of wheels came dull and muffled on her ear: those were phantoms surely, those meaningless faces that met her in the street, not living men and women, and yet she had a distinct perception of an apple-woman's stall, of some sham jewellery she saw in a shop-window. She was near turning back then, but it didn't seem worth while, and it was less trouble to plod stupidly on, always westward, always towards the setting sun!

Without knowing how she got there, presently she felt tufts of grass beneath her feet dank with dew, growing greener and coarser under large towering elms. Oh! she knew an elm-tree, well enough! She was country bred, she was, and could milk a cow long ago.

It wasn't Kensington Gardens, was it? She

didn't remember whether she'd ever been here before or not. She'd heard of the place, of course, indeed Jim had promised to take her there some Sunday. Then she shivered from head to foot, and wrapped her shawl tight round her as she walked on.

What was that shining far-off between the trees, cool, and quiet, and bright, like heaven? Could it be the water? That was what had brought her, to be sure. She remembered all about it now, and hurried forward with quick, irregular steps, causing her breath to come thick, and her heart to beat with sudden choking throbs.

She pulled at her collar, and undid its fastenings. She took her bonnet off and swung it in her hand. The soiled tawdry ribbon had been given her by Jim, long ago. Was it long ago? She couldn't tell, and what did it matter? She wouldn't have looked twice at it a while back. She might kiss and cuddle it now, if she'd a mind.

What a long way off that water seemed!

Not there yet, and she had been walking—walking like the wayfarer she remembered to have read of in the “Pilgrim’s Progress.” All in a moment, with a flash, as it were, of its own light, there it lay glistening at her feet. Another step and she would have been in head-foremost! There was time enough. How cool and quiet it looked! She sat down on the brink and wondered why she was born!

Would Jim feel it very much? Ah! they’d none of them care for him like she used. He’d find that out at last. How could he? How *could* he? She’d given him fair warning!

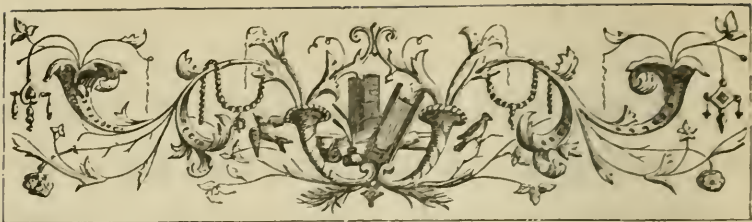
She’d do it now. This moment, while she’d a mind to it. Afraid! Why should she be afraid? Better than the gin-palace! Better than the workhouse! Better than the cold cruel streets! She couldn’t be worse off anywhere than here! Once! Twice!

Her head swam. She was rising to her feet, when a light touch rested on her shoulder, and the sweetest voice that had ever sounded in poor Dorothea’s ears, whispered softly, “You

are ill, my good woman. Don't sit here on the damp grass. Come home with me."

What did it mean? Was it over? Could this be one of the angels, and had she got to heaven after all? No; there were the trees, the grass, the distant roar of the city, and the peaceful water—fair, smooth, serene, like the face of a friend.

She burst into a fit of hysterical weeping, cowering under that kindly touch as if it had been a mountain to crush her, rocking herself to and fro, sobbing out wildly, "I wish I was dead! I wish I was dead!"



CHAPTER XIII.

BEAT.

LIKE a disturbed spirit Lady Bearwarden wandered about in the fever of a sorrow, so keen that her whole soul would sometimes rise in rebellion against the unaccustomed pain. There was something stifling to her senses in the fact of remaining between the four walls of a house. She panted for air, motion, freedom, and betook herself to Kensington Gardens, partly because that beautiful retreat lay within an easy walk of her house, partly perhaps, that for her, as for many of us, it had been brightened by a certain transient and delusive

light which turns everything to gold while it lasts, leaves everything but a dull dim copper when it has passed away.

It was a benevolent and merciful restriction, no doubt, that debarred our first parents from re-entering the paradise they had forfeited. Better far to carry away unsullied and unfaded the sweet sad memories of the Happy Land, than revisit it to find weeds grown rank, fountains dry, the skies darkened, the song of birds hushed, its bloom faded off the flower, and its glory departed from the day.

She used to sit here in the shade with *him*. There was the very tree. Even the broken chair they had laughed at was not mended, and yet for her a century ago could not have seemed a more hopeless past. Other springs would bloom with coming years, other summers glow, and she could not doubt that many another worshipper would kneel humbly and gratefully at her shrine, but their votive garlands could never more glisten with the fresh dew of morning, the fumes from their

lower altars, though they might lull the senses and intoxicate the brain, could never thrill like that earlier incense, with subtle sudden poison to her heart.

To be sure, on more than one occasion she had walked here with Dick Stanmore too. It was but human nature, I suppose, that she should have looked on that gentleman's grievances from a totally different point of view. It couldn't be half so bad in his case, she argued, men had so many resources, so many distractions. She was sorry for him, of course, but he couldn't be expected to feel a disappointment of this nature like a woman, and, after all, theirs was more a flirtation than an attachment. He need not have minded it so very much, and had probably fancied he cared a great deal more than he really did.

It is thus we are all prone to reason, gauging the tide of each other's feelings by the ebb and flow of our own.

Love, diffused amongst the species, is the best and purest of earthly motives, concentrated

on the individual it seems but a dual selfishness after all.

There were few occupants of the Gardens ; here two or three nursery-maids and children, there a foreign gentleman reading a newspaper. Occasionally, in some rare sequestered nook, an umbrella, springing up unnecessarily and defiantly like a toadstool, above two male legs and a muslin skirt. Lady Bearwarden passed on, with a haughty step, and a bitter smile.

There is something of freemasonry in sorrow. Dorothea's vague abstracted gait arrested Maud's attention even from a distance, and involuntarily, the delicate lady followed on the track of that limp shabby figure with which she had but this one unconscious link, of a common sorrow, an aching heart.

Approaching nearer, she watched the poor sufferer with a curiosity that soon grew to interest and even alarm.

While Dorothea sat herself down by the water's edge, her ladyship looked round in vain for a policeman or a park-keeper, holding

herself in readiness to prevent the horror she already anticipated, and which drove clear off her mind every thought of her own regrets and despondency.

There was no time to lose ; when the despairing woman half rose to her feet, Lady Bearwarden interposed, calm, collected, and commanding in the courage which had hitherto never failed her in an emergency.

That burst of hysterical tears, that despairing cry, "I wish I was dead!" told her for the present Dorothea was saved. She sat down on the grass by her side. She took the poor coarse hands in her own. She laid the drooping head on her lap, and with gentle, loving phrases, such as soothe a suffering child, encouraged the helpless wretch to weep and sob her fill.

She could have wept too for company, because of the load that seemed lifted in an instant from her own breast ; but this was a time for action, and at such a season it was no part of Maud's nature to sit down and cry.

It was long ere the numbed heart and sur-

charged brain had relieved themselves sufficiently for apprehension and intelligible speech. Dorothea's first impulse, on coming to herself, was to smooth her unkempt hair and apologise for the disorder of her costume.

"Never mind your dress," said Lady Bearwarden, resuming, now the crisis was past, her habitual air of authority, conscious that it would be most efficacious under the circumstances. "You are tired and exhausted. You must have food and rest. I ask no questions, and I listen to no explanations, at least till to-morrow. Can you walk to the gate? You must come home with me."

"Oh, Miss! Oh, my lady!" stammered poor Dorothea, quite overcome by such unlikely sympathy, such unexpected succour.

"It's too much! It's too much! I'm not fit for it! If you only knowed what I am!" then, lifting her eyes to the other's face, a pang, keener than all previous sufferings, went through her woman's heart like the thrust of a knife. It all came on her at once. This beautiful

being, clad in shining raiment who had saved and soothed her like an angel from heaven, was the pale girl Jim had gone to visit in her stately, luxurious home, when she followed him so far through those weary streets on the night of the thunderstorm.

She could bear no more. Her physical system gave way, just as a tree that has sustained crash after crash falls with the last well-directed blow. She rolled her eyes, lifted both bare arms above her head, and with a faint despairing cry, went down at Lady Bearwarden's feet, motionless and helpless as the dead.

But assistance was at hand at last. A park-keeper helped to raise the prostrate figure. An elderly gentleman volunteered to fetch a cab. Amongst them they supported Dorothea to the gate and placed her in the vehicle. The park-keeper touched his hat, the elderly gentleman made a profusion of bows and as many offers of assistance which were declined, while Maud, soothing and supporting her charge, told the driver where to stop. As they jingled

and rattled away from the gate, a pardonable curiosity prompted the elderly gentleman to inquire the name of this beautiful Samaritan, clad in silks and satins, so ready to succour the fallen and give shelter to the homeless. The park-keeper took his hat off, looked in the crown, and put it on again.

“I see her once afore under them trees,” he said, “with a gentleman. I see a many and I don’t often take notice. But she’s a rare sort she is! and as good as she’s good-looking. I wish you a good-evening, sir.”

Then he retired into his cabin and ruminated on this “precious start,” as he called it, during his tea.

Meantime, Maud took her charge home, and would fain have put her to bed. For this sanatory measure, however, Dorothea, who had recovered consciousness, seemed to entertain an unaccountable repugnance. She consented, indeed, to lie down for an hour or two, but could not conceal a wild, restless anxiety to depart as soon as possible. Something more

than the obvious astonishment of the servants, something more than the incongruity of the situation, seemed prompting her to leave Lady Bearwarden's house without delay and fly from the presence of almost the first friend she had ever known in her life.

When the bustle and excitement consequent on this little adventure had subsided, her ladyship found herself once more face to face with her own sorrow, and the despondency she had shaken off during a time of action gathered again all the blacker and heavier round her heart. She was glad to find distraction in the arrival of a nameless visitor, announced by the most pompous of footmen as "a young person desirous of waiting on her ladyship."

"Show her up," said Lady Bearwarden; and for the first time in their lives the two sisters stood face to face.

Each started, as if she had come suddenly on her own reflection in a mirror. During a few seconds both looked stupefied, bewildered. Lady Bearwarden spoke first.

“You wish to see me, I believe. A sick person has just been brought into the house, and we are rather in confusion. I fear you have been kept waiting.”

“I called while your ladyship was out,” answered Nina. “So I walked about till I thought you must have come home again. You’ve never seen me before—I didn’t even know where you lived—I found your address in the ‘Court Guide’—Oh! I can’t say it properly, but I did so want to speak to you. I hope I haven’t done anything rude or wrong.”

There was no mistaking the refinement of Nina’s voice and manner.

Lady Bearwarden recognised one of her own station at a glance. And this girl so like herself—how beautiful she was! How beautiful they both were!

“What can I do for you?” said her ladyship, very kindly. “Sit down; I am sure you must be tired.”

But Nina had too much of her sister’s cha-

racter to feel tired when there was a purpose to carry out. The girl stood erect and looked full in her ladyship's face. All unconscious of their relationship, the likeness between them was at this moment so striking as to be ludicrous.

"I have come on a strange errand, Lady Bearwarden," said Nina, hardening her heart for the impending effort—"I have come to tell a truth and to put a question. I suppose, even now, you have some regard for your husband?"

Lady Bearwarden started. "What do you know about my husband?" she asked, turning very pale.

"That he is in danger," was the answer, in a voice of such preternatural fortitude as promised a speedy breakdown. "That he is going to fight a duel—and it's about *you*—with—*with* Mr. Stanmore! Oh! Lady Bearwarden, how *could* you? You'd everything in the world, everything to make a woman good and happy, and now, see what you've done!"

Tears and choking sobs were coming thick, but she kept them back.

“What do you mean?” exclaimed Maud, trembling in every limb, for through the dark midnight of her misery she began to see gleams of a coming dawn.

“I mean *this*,” answered Nina, steadying herself bravely. “Lord Bearwarden has found everything out. He has sent a challenge to Mr. Stanmore. I—I—care for Mr. Stanmore, Lady Bearwarden—at least, I *did*. I was engaged to him.” (Here, notwithstanding the tumult of her feelings, a little twinge crossed Lady Bearwarden to learn how quickly Dick had consoled himself.) “I’m only a girl, but I know these things *can* be prevented, and that’s why I’m here now. You’ve done the mischief; you are bound to repair it; and I have a right to come to you for help.”

“But I haven’t done anything!” pleaded Maud, in far humbler tones than she habitually used. “I love my husband very dearly, and I’ve not set eyes on Mr. Stanmore but once

since I married, in Oxford Street, looking into a shop-window, and directly he caught sight of me, he got out of the way as if I had the plague! There's some mistake. Not a minute should be lost in setting it right. I wonder what we ought to do!"

"And—and you're not in love with Mr. Stanmore? and he isn't going to run away with you? Lady Bearwarden, are you quite sure? And I don't deserve to be so happy. I judged him so harshly, so unkindly. What will he think of me when he knows it? He'll never speak to me again."

Then the tears came in good earnest, and presently Miss Algernon grew more composed, giving her hostess an account of herself, her prospects, her Putney home, and the person she most depended on in the world to get them all out of their present difficulty, Simon Perkins, the painter.

"I know he can stop it," pursued Nina, eagerly, "and he will too. He told the other man nothing should be done in a hurry. I

heard him say so, for I listened, Lady Bear-warden, I *did*. And I would again if I had the same reason. Wouldn't *you*? I hope the other man will be hanged. He seemed to want them so to kill each other. Don't you think he can be punished? For it's murder, you know, *really*, after all."

Without entering into the vexed question of duelling—a practice for which each lady in her heart entertained a secret respect—the sisters consulted long and earnestly on the best method of preventing a conflict that should endanger the two lives now dearer to them than ever.

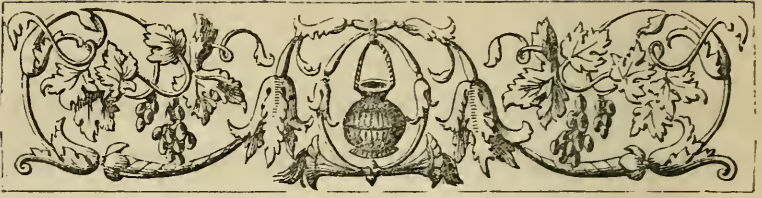
They drank tea over it, we may be sure, and in the course of that refreshment could not fail to observe how the gloves they laid aside were the same number (six and three-quarters, if you would like to know), how their hands were precisely similar in shape, how the turn of their arms and wrists corresponded as closely as the tone of their voices. Each thought she liked the other better than any one she had ever met of her own sex.

After a long debate it was decided that Nina should return at once to her Putney home, doubtless ere now much disturbed at her prolonged absence; that she should have full powers to inform Simon of all the confidences regarding her husband Lady Bearwarden had poured in her ear; should authorize him to seek his lordship out and tell him the whole truth on his wife's behalf; also, finally, for women rarely neglect the worship of Nemesis, that after a general reconciliation had been effected, measures should be taken for bringing to condign punishment the false friend who had been at such pains to foment hostilities between the men they both loved.

Lady Bearwarden had her hand on the bell to order the carriage for her visitor, but the latter would not hear of it.

“I can get a cab every twenty yards in this part of the town,” said Nina. “I shall be home in three-quarters of an hour. It's hardly dark yet, and I'm quite used to going about by myself. I'm not at all a coward, Lady

Bearwarden, but my aunts would be horribly alarmed if one of your smart carriages drove up to the gate. Besides, I don't believe it could turn round in the lane. No; I won't even have a servant, thanks. I'll put my bonnet on and start at once, please. You've been very kind to me and I'm so much obliged. Good-night!"



CHAPTER XIV.

NIGHT-HAWKS.

LORD BEARWARDEN'S groom of the chambers, a person by no means deficient in self-confidence, owned that he was mystified. Amongst all the domestic dissensions with which his situation had made him familiar, he could recall nothing like his present experience. This bringing home of a shabby woman out of the street and ordering the best bedroom for her reception; this visit of a beautiful young person so exactly resembling his mistress that, but for the evidence of his own senses, when he brought in tea and found them together, he could have sworn it was her

ladyship ; this general confusion of household arrangements, and culpable indifference to the important ceremony of dinner, forced him to admit that he was in a position of which he had no preconceived idea, and from which he doubted whether he could extricate himself with the dignity essential to his office.

Returning to his own department, and glancing at the letter-box in the hall, he reflected with satisfaction how his professional duties had been scrupulously fulfilled, and how, in accordance with his misconception of Lord Bearwarden's orders, every packet that reached the house had been forwarded to its master without delay.

Hence it came to pass, that the vexed and angry husband received in due course of post a letter which puzzled him exceedingly.

He had only just digested Tom Ryfe's unwelcome missive, announcing somewhat vaguely that the revenge for which he panted must be delayed two or three days at least, and had cursed, energetically enough, his own friend's

mismanagement of the affair, with the scruples entertained by the other side, when a fresh budget was placed in his hands, and he opened the envelopes as people often do, without looking at their addresses: thus it fell out, that he read the anonymous letter directed to his wife, asking for a meeting that same night, in the vicinity of his own house.

“A cruel mystery has deprived you of your husband.” What could it mean? He studied the brief communication very attentively, particularly that first line. And a vague hope rose in his loving, generous heart, that he might have judged her too harshly after all. It was but the faintest spark, yet he tried hard to kindle it into flame. The wariest rogue is never armed on all sides. He is sure to forget some trifling precaution, that, left unguarded, is like the chink in a shutter to let in the light of day. Lord Bearwarden recognised the same hand that had penned the anonymous letter he received on Guard—this argued a plot of some sort. He resolved to sift the matter thoroughly,

and instead of forwarding so mysterious a request to his wife, repair to the indicated spot in person, and there by threats, bribery, compulsion, any or all means in his power, arrive at a true solution of the mystery.

It was a welcome distraction, too, this new idea, with which to while away the weary interminable day. It seemed well perhaps, after all, that the duel had been postponed. He might learn something to-night that would change the whole current of his actions, if not, let Mr. Stanmore look to himself!

That gentleman, in the mean time, had completely forgotten Lord Bearwarden's existence—had forgotten Mr. Ryfe's visit the night before at his club, the unintelligible quarrel, the proposed meeting, everything but that Nina was lost. Lost! a stray lamb, helpless in the streets of London! His blood ran cold to think of it. He hastened down to Putney, and indeed only knew that he had made so sure of finding her there, by his disappointment to learn she had not returned home. It made his task no easier

that Aunt Susannah was in the garden when he reached the house, and he had to dissemble his alarm in presence of that weakminded and affectionate spinster. "He was passing by," he said, "on his way to town, and only looked in, (he couldn't stay a moment) to know if they had any message to—to their nephew. He was going straight from here to the painting-room."

"How considerate!" said Aunt Susannah; not without reason, for it was but this morning they parted with Simon, and they expected him back to dinner! "We have a few autumn flowers left. I'll just run in, and get the scissors to make up a nosegay. It won't take ten minutes. Oh! nothing like ten minutes! You can give it to poor Simon with our dear love. He's so fond of flowers! and Nina too. But perhaps you know Nina's tastes as well as we do, and indeed I think they're very creditable to her, and she's not at all a bad judge!"

Then the good lady, shaking her grey curls,

smiled and looked knowing, while Dick cursed her below his breath, for a grinning old idiot, and glared wildly about him, like a beast in a trap seeking some way of escape. It was provoking, no doubt, to be kept talking platitudes to a silly old woman in the garden, while every moment drifted his heart's treasure further and further into the uncertainty he scarcely dared to contemplate.

Some women are totally deficient in the essentially feminine quality of tact. Aunt Susannah, with a pocket-handkerchief tied round her head, might have stood drivelling nonsense to her visitor for an hour, and never found out he wanted to get away. Fortunately, she went indoors for her scissors, and Dick, regardless of the proprieties, made his escape forthwith, thus avoiding also the ignominy of carrying back to London a nosegay as big as a chimneysweep's on May-day.

Hastening to the painting-room, his worst fears were realized. Nina had not returned. Simon, too, began to share his alarm, and

not without considerable misgivings did the two men hold counsel on their future movements.

It occurred to them at this juncture, that the maid-of-all-work below stairs might possibly impart some information as to the exact time when the young lady left the house. They rang for that domestic accordingly, and bewildered her with a variety of questions in vain.

Had she seen Miss Algernon during the morning? She was to think, and take time, and answer without being frightened.

“Miss Algernon! Lor! that was her as come here most days, along o’ him,” with a backward nod at Dick. “No—she hadn’t a-seen her to-day she was sure. Not *particler* that waş. Not more nor any other day.”

“Had she seen her at all?”

“Oh, yes! she’d seen her at all. In course you know, she couldn’t be off of seeing her at all!”

“When did she see her?”

“When? oh! last week, every day a’-most.

And the week afore that too! She wasn't a-goin' to tell a lie!"

"Then she hadn't seen her this morning?"

"Yes, she'd seen her this morning. When she come in, you know, along o' the other gentleman." Here a dive of the shock head at Simon, and symptoms of approaching emotion.

"Why you said you hadn't at first!" exclaimed Dick, perplexed and provoked.

Forthwith a burst of sobs and tears.

"Compose yourself, my good girl," said the painter, kindly. "We don't want to hurry nor confuse you. We are in great distress ourselves. Miss Algernon went out, we believe, to take a walk. She has not returned here, nor gone home. It would help us very much if we knew the exact time at which she left the house, or could find anybody who saw her after she went away."

If you want a woman to help you, even a maid-of-all-work, tell her your whole story and make no half-confidences: the drudge bright-

ened up through her tears, and assumed a look of intelligence at once.

“Lor!” said she, “why didn’t ye say so? In course I see the young lady, as I was a-fetchin’ in the dinner beer. She’d a-got her bonnet on, I took notice, and was may-be goin’ for a walk, or to get a few odds and ends, or such like.”

Here a full stop with a curtsey. The men looked at each other and waited.

“She went into a shop round the corner, for I seen her myself. A stationer’s shop it were. An’ I come home then, with the beer, an’ shut to the door, an’ I couldn’t tell you no more, no; not if you was to take and kill me dead this very minute!”

Stronger symptoms of agitation now appearing, Simon thought well to dismiss this incoherent witness, and proceed at once to the stationer’s shop in quest of further intelligence. Its proprietor was ready to furnish all the information in his power.

“Had a lady answering their description

been in his shop?" "Well, a great many ladies come backwards and forwards, you know. Trade wasn't very brisk just now, but there was always something doing in the fancy stationery line. It was a light business, and most of his customers were females. His 'missis' didn't take much notice, but he happened to be something of a physiognomist himself, and a face never escaped him. A very beautiful young lady, was it? Tall, pale, with dark eyes and hair. Certainly, no doubt, that must be the party. Stepped in about dinner-time; seemed anxious and in a hurry, as you might say; didn't take any order from her,—the young lady only asked as a favour to look into their 'Court Guide.' There it lay, just as she left it. Singular enough, another party had come in afterwards to write a letter, and took the same address he believed, right at the foot of the column; these were trifles, but it was his way to notice trifles. He was a scientific man, to a certain extent, and in science, as they probably knew, there were no such things as

trifles. He remembered a curious story of Sir Isaac Newton. But perhaps the gentlemen were in a hurry."

The gentlemen *were* in a hurry. Dick Stanmore with characteristic impetuosity had plunged at the "Court Guide," to scan the page at which it lay open with eager eyes. At the foot of the column said this man of science. To be sure, there it was, Barsac, Barwise, Barzillai, Bearwarden—the very last name in the page. And yet what could Nina want at Lord Bearwarden's house? Of all places in London why should she go there? Nevertheless, in such a hopeless search, the vaguest hint was welcome, the faintest clue must be followed out. So the two men, standing in earnest colloquy, under the gas-lamps, resolved to hunt their trail as far as Lord Bearwarden's residence without further delay.

The more precious are the moments, the faster they seem to pass. An autumn day had long given place to night, ere they verified this last piece of intelligence, and acquired some

definite aim for their exertions; but neither liked to compare notes with the other, nor express his own disheartening reflection that Nina might be wandering so late, bewildered, lonely, and unprotected through the labyrinths of the great city.

In the mean time, Gentleman Jim and his confederate were fully occupied with the details necessary to carry their infamous plot into execution. The lawyer had drawn out from the bank all the ready money he could lay hands on, amounting to several hundred pounds. He had furnished Jim with ample funds to facilitate his share of the preparations, and he had still an hour or two on hand before the important moment arrived. That interval he devoted to his private affairs, and those of the office, so that his uncle should be inconvenienced as little as possible by an absence, which he now hoped might be prolonged for a considerable time.

It had been dark for more than an hour ere the accomplices met again, equipped and ready

for the work they had pledged themselves to undertake.

Jim, indeed, contrary to his wont, when "business," as he called it, was on hand, seemed scarcely sober; but to obtain the use of the vehicle he required without the company of its driver, he had found it necessary to ply the latter with liquor till he became insensible, although the drunken man's instincts of good fellowship bade him insist that his generous entertainer should partake largely of the fluids consumed at his expense. To drink down a London cabman, on anything like fair terms, is an arduous task, even for a housebreaker, and Jim's passions were roused to their worst by alcohol long before he arrived with his four-wheeled cab at the appointed spot where he was to wait for Tom Ryfe.

How he laughed to himself while he felt the pliant life-preserver coiled in his great-coat pocket — the long, keen, murderous knife resting against his heart. A fiend had taken possession of the man. Already overleaping

the intervening time, ignoring everything but the crime he meditated, his chief difficulty seemed how he should dispose of Tom's mutilated body ere he flew to reap the harvest of his guilt.

He chuckled and grinned with a fierce, savage sense of humour, while he recalled the imperious manner in which Mr. Ryfe had taken the initiative in their joint proceedings; as if they originated in his own invention, were ordered solely for his own convenience; and the tone of authority in which that gentleman had warned him not to be late.

"It's good! That is!" said Jim, sitting on the box of the cab, and peering into the darkness, through which a gas-lamp glimmered with dull, uncertain rays, blurred by the autumn fog. "You'd like to be master, you would, I dare say, all through the job, and for me to be man! You'd best look sharp about it. I'll have that blessed life of yours afore the sun's up to-morrow, and see who'll be master then. Ay, and missis too! Hooray!

for the cruel eyes, and the touch-me-not airs! The proud, pale-faced devil! as thought Jim wasn't quite the equals of the dirt beneath her feet. Steady! Here he comes."

And looming through the fog, Mr. Ryfe approached with cautious, resolute step; carrying a revolver in his pocket, prepared to use it, too, on occasion, with the fearless energy of a desperate man.

"Is it all ready, Jim?" said he in a whisper. "You haven't forgot the gag? Nor the shawl to throw round her head? The least mistake upsets a job like this."

For answer, Jim descended heavily from his seat, and holding the cab-door open, pointed to the above-named articles lying folded on the front seat.

"You'll drive, master," said he, with a hoarse chuckle. "You knows the way. First turn to the left. I'll ride inside, like a lord, or a fashionable doctor, and keep my eye on the tackle."

"It's very dark," continued Tom, uneasily.

“But that’s all in our favour, of course. You know her figure as well as I do. Don’t forget, now. I’ll drive close to the pavement, and the instant we stop, you must throw the shawl over her head, muffle her up, and whip her in. This beggar can gallop, I suppose.”

“He’s a thoroughbred ’un,” answered Jim, with a sounding pat on the horse’s bony ribs. “Leastways, so the chap as I borrowed him off of swore solemn. He was so precious drunk, I’m blessed if I think he knowed what he meant. But howsoever, I make no doubt the critter can go when it’s pushed.”

Thus speaking, Jim helped the other to mount the box, and placed himself inside with the door open, ready to spring like a tiger when he should catch sight of his prey.

The streets of the great city are never so deserted as an hour or two after nightfall, and an hour or two before dawn. Not a single passenger did they meet, and only one policeman; while the cab with its desperate inmates rattled and jolted along on this nefarious enterprise.

It was stopped at last, close to the footway in a dimly-lighted street, within a hundred yards of Lord Bearwarden's house, which stood a few doors off round the corner.

A distant clock struck the hour. That heavy clang seemed to dwell on the gloomy stillness of the atmosphere, and both men felt their nerves strangely jarred by the dull, familiar sound.

Their hearts beat fast. Tom began to wish he had adopted some less unconventional means of attaining his object, and tried in vain to drive from his mind the punishments awarded to such offences as he meditated, by the severity of our criminal code.

Jim had but one feeling, with which heart and brain were saturated. In a few minutes he would see her again! In a new character, possibly—tearful, humbled, supplicating. No; his instincts told him that not even the last extremity of danger would force a tear from those proud eyes, nor bow that haughty head an inch. How this wild, fierce worship

maddened him! So longing, yet so slavish—so reckless, so debased, yet all the while cursed with a certain leavening of the true faith, that drove him to despair. But come what might, in a few minutes he would see her again. Even at such a time, there was something of repose and happiness in the thought.

So the quasi-thoroughbred horse went to sleep and the men waited; waited, wondering how the lagging minutes could pass so slow.

Listen! a light footstep round the corner. The gentle rustle of a woman's dress. A tall, slight figure gliding yonder under the gas-lamp, coming down the street, even now, with head erect, and easy, undulating gait.

The blood rose to Jim's brain till it beat like strokes from a sledgehammer. Tom shortened the reins, and tightened his grasp round the whip.

Nearer, nearer, she came on. The pure, calm face held high aloft, the pliant figure moving ever with the same smooth, graceful gestures. Fortune favoured them; she stop-

ped when she reached the cab, and seemed about to engage it for her journey.

The men were quick to see their advantage. Jim, coiled for a spring, shrank into the darkest corner of the vehicle. Tom, enacting driver, jumped down, and held the door to help her in.

Catching sight of the dark figure on the front seat, she started back. The next moment, there rose a faint stifled shriek, the shawl was over her head. Jim's powerful arms wound themselves tight round her body, and Tom clambered in haste to the box.

But quick feet had already rained along that fifty yards of pavement. A powerful grasp was at the driver's throat, pulling him back between the wheels of the cab; and he found himself struggling for life with a strong, angry man, who swore desperately, while two more figures ran at speed up the street.

Tom's eyes were starting, his tongue was out.

"Jim, help me!" he managed to articulate. "I'm choking."

"You infernal scoundrel!" exclaimed his

antagonist, whose fury seemed redoubled by the sound of that familiar voice: the grasp closing round Tom's neck like iron, threatened death unless he could get free.

An instinct of self-preservation bade him pluck at his revolver. He got it out at the moment when Jim, setting his back to the door to secure his captive, dealt with the heavy life-preserver a blow at the assailant's head, which fortunately only reached his shoulder. The latter released Tom's throat to get possession of the pistol. In the struggle it went off. There was a hideous blasphemy, a groan, and a heavy fall between the wheels of the cab.

Ere the smoke cleared away two more auxiliaries appeared on the scene. With Simon Perkins' assistance, Lord Bearwarden had little difficulty in pinioning his late antagonist, while Dick Stanmore, having lifted the imprisoned lady out of the cab, over the housebreaker's prostrate body, held her tightly embraced, in a transport of affection intensified by alarm.

Lord Bearwarden, usually so collected, was now utterly stupefied and amazed. He looked from Tom Ryfe's white face, staring over the badge and great-coat of a London cabman, to the sinking form of his wife—as he believed—in the arms of her lover, clinging to him for protection, responding in utter shamelessness to his caresses and endearments.

“Mr. Stanmore!” he exclaimed, in a voice breathless from exertion, and choking with anger. “You and I have an account to settle that cannot be put off. Lady Bearwarden, I will see you home. Come with me this instant.”

Dick seemed as if he thought his lordship had gone mad. Nina stared helplessly at the group. Another gasp and a fainter groan came from the body lying underneath the cab.

“We must look to this man; he is dying,” said Simon Perkins, on his knees by the prostrate form, now motionless and insensible.

“My house is round the corner,” answered Lord Bearwarden, stooping over the fallen

ruffian. "Let us take him in. All the doctors in the world won't save him," he added, in a tone of grave pity. "He's bleeding to death inside."

Nina had been a good deal frightened, but recovered wonderfully in the reassuring presence of her lover. "*His* house?" she asked, in a sufficiently audible voice, considering her late agitation. "Who is he, Dick? and where does he live?"

Two of the police had now arrived, and were turning their lanterns on the party. The strong white light glared full on Miss Algeron's face and figure, so like Lady Bearwarden's, but yet to the husband's bewildered senses so surely not his wife's.

He shook all over. His face, though flushed a moment ago, turned deadly pale. He clutched Dick's shoulder, and his voice came dry and husky, while he gasped—

"What is it, Stanmore? Speak, man, for the love of heaven? What does it all mean?"

Then came question and answer; clearer,

fuller, more fluent with every sentence. And so the explanation went on; how some enemy had roused his worst suspicions; how Lord Bearwarden, deceived by the extraordinary likeness which he could not but acknowledge even now, had been satisfied he saw Dick Stanmore with Maud in a hansom cab; how he had left his home in consequence, and sent that hostile message to Dick, which had so puzzled that gallant, open-hearted gentleman; how a certain letter from Lady Bearwarden, addressed to Mr. Stanmore, and forwarded to her husband, had but confirmed his suspicions; and how, at last, an anonymous communication to the same lady, falling accidentally into his hands, had mystified him completely, and made him resolve to watch and follow her at the hour named, with a desperate hope that something might be revealed to alleviate his sufferings, to give him more certainty of action for future guidance.

“I was horribly cut up, I don’t mind confessing it,” said Lord Bearwarden, with his

kindly grasp still on Dick's shoulder. "And I waited there, outside my own house, like some d——d poaching thief. It seemed so hard I couldn't go in and see her just once more! Presently, out she came, as I thought, and I followed, very craftily, and not too near for fear she should look round. She didn't, though, but walked straight on; and when I saw the cab waiting, and she stopped as if she meant to get in, I couldn't tell what to make of it at all.

"I was only just in time. I came that last few yards with a rush, I give you my word! And I made a grab at the driver, thinking the best chance was to stop the conveyance at once, or if I couldn't do that, take a free passage with the rest of them. She wasn't going of her own accord, I felt sure. That villain of a lawyer struggled hard. I didn't think he'd been so good a man. I wasn't at all sorry to see you fellows coming up. It was two to one, you know, and I do believe, if it hadn't been for the pistol, they might have

got clear off. It shot the worst customer of the two, that poor fellow behind us, right through the body. Under my arm, I should think, for I got a very nasty one on the shoulder just as the smoke flew in my face. It has squared *his* accounts, I fancy! But here we are at my house. Let's get him in, and then you must introduce me properly to this young lady, whose acquaintance I have made in such an unusual manner."

The strange procession had, indeed, arrived at Lord Bearwarden's residence. It consisted of the proprietor himself, whose right arm was now completely disabled, but who gesticulated forcibly with his left; of Dick Stanmore and Nina, listening to his lordship with the utmost deference and attention; of Jim's senseless body, carried by Simon Perkins and one policeman, while Tom Ryfe, in close custody of the other, brought up the rear.

As they entered the hall, Lady Bearwarden's pale, astonished face was seen looking over the banisters. Dorothea, too, creeping down

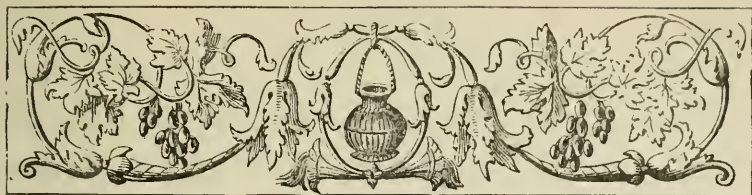
stairs, with some vague idea of escaping from this friendly refuge, and finding her way back, perhaps, to the cool shining Serpentine, came full upon the group at the moment when Jim was laid tenderly down by his bearers, and the policeman whispered audibly to his comrade that, even if the doctor were in the next street now, he would come too late!

She ran forward with a wild, despairing cry. She flung herself down by the long, limp, helpless figure. She raised the drooping head with its matted locks, its fixed, white, rigid face, and pressed it hard against her bosom—hard to her wayward, ignorant, warped, but loving heart.

“Speak to me, Jim!” she moaned once more, rocking backwards and forwards in her fierce agony. “Speak to me, deary! You’ll never speak again. Oh! why did they stop me to-day? It’s cruel—cruel! Why did they stop me? We’d have been together before now!”

And the groom-of-the-chambers, an un-

willing witness of all these indecorous proceedings, resolved, for that one night, to do his duty stanchly by his employer, but give up his place with inflexible dignity on the morrow.



CHAPTER XV.

UNDER THE ACACIAS.

“**O**UT of drawing; flesh tints infamous; chiaroscuro grossly muddled; no breadth; not much story in it; badly composed; badly treated; badly painted altogether.”

So said the reviews, laying down the inflexible law of the writer, concerning Simon Perkins's great picture. The public followed the reviews, of course, in accordance with a generous instinct, urging it to believe that he who can write his own language, not, indeed, accurately, but with a certain force and rapidity, must therefore be conversant with all the sub-

jects on which he chooses to declaim. Statesman, chemist, engineer, shipbuilder, soldier, above all, navigator, painter, plasterer, and statuary; like the hungry Greek adventurer of Juvenal, *omnia novit*: like Horace's wise man amongst the Stoics; be the subject boots, beauty, bullocks, or the beer-trade, he is universal instructor and referee.

“Et sutor bonus, et solus formosus, et est rex.”

So reviewers abused the picture persistently, and Lord Bearwarden was furious, brandishing a weekly newspaper above his head, and striding about the little Putney lawn with an energy that threatened to immerse him in the river, forgetful of those narrow limits, suggesting the proverbial extent of a fisherman's walk on deck, “two steps and overboard.”

His audience, though, were partial and indulgent. The old ladies in the drawing-room, overhearing an occasional sentence, devoutly believed their nephew was the first painter of his time, Lord Bearwarden the wisest critic

that ever lived, the greatest nobleman, the bravest soldier, the kindest husband, always excepting, perhaps, that other husband smoking there under the acacia, interchanging with his lordship many a pleasant jest and smile, that argued the good understanding existing between them.

Dick Stanmore and Lord Bearwarden were now inseparable. Their alliance furnished a standing joke for their wives. "They have the same perverted tastes, my dear, and like the same sort of people," lighthearted Nina would observe to the sister whom she had not found till the close of her girlish life. "It's always fast friends, or, at least, men with a strong tendency to friendship, who are in love with the same woman, and I don't believe they hate each other half as much as we should, even for *that!*"

To which Maud would make no reply, gazing with her dark eyes out upon the river, and wondering whether Dick had ever told the wife he loved how fondly he once worshipped another face so like her own.

For my part, I don't think he had. I don't think he could realize the force of those past feelings, nor comprehend that he could ever have cared much for any one but the darling who now made the joy of his whole life. When first he fell in love with Nina, it was for her likeness to her sister. Now, though in his eyes the likeness was fading every day, that sister's face was chiefly dear to him because of its resemblance to his wife's.

Never was there a happier family party than these persons constituted. Lord and Lady Bearwarden, Mr. and Mrs. Stanmore, drove down from London many days in the week to the pretty Putney villa. Simon was truly rejoiced to see them, while the old ladies vibrated all over, caps, fronts, ribbons, locketts, and laces, with excitement and delight. The very flowers had a sweeter perfume, the laburnums a richer gold, the river a softer ripple, than in the experience of all previous springs.

"They may say what they like," continued Lord Bearwarden, still with the weekly paper

in his hand. "I maintain the criterion of merit is success. I maintain that the Rhymer and the Fairy Queen is an extraordinary picture, and the general public the best judge. Why there was no getting near it at the Academy. The people crowded round as they do about a Cheap Jack at a fair. I'm not a little fellow, but I couldn't catch a glimpse of any part except the Fairy Queen's head. I think it's *the* most beautiful face I ever saw in my life!"

"Thank you, Lord Bearwarden," said Nina, laughing. "He'd such a subject, you know; it's no wonder he made a good picture of it."

No wonder, indeed! Did she ever think his brush was dipped in colours ground on the poor artist's heart?

"It's very like *you* and it's very like Maud," answered Lord Bearwarden. "Somehow you don't seem to me so like each other as you used to be. And yet how puzzled I was the second time I ever set eyes on you."

"How cross you were! and how you

scolded!" answered saucy Mrs. Stanmore. "I wouldn't have stood it from Dick. Do you ever speak to Maud like that?"

The look that passed between Lord and Lady Bearwarden was a sufficient reply. The crowning beauty had come to those dark eyes of hers, now that their pride was centred in another, their lustre deepened and softened with the light of love.

"It was lucky for you, dear, that he *was* angry," said her ladyship. "If he had hesitated a moment, it's frightful to think what would have become of you, at the mercy of those reckless desperate men!"

"They were punished, at any rate," observed Nina, gravely. "I shall never forget that dead fixed face in the hall. Nor the other man's look, the cowardly one, while he prayed to be forgiven. Forgiven, indeed! One ought to forgive a great deal, but not such an enormity as that!"

"I think he got off very cheap," interposed Dick Stanmore. "He deserved to be hanged,

in my opinion, and they only transported him —not even for life!”

“Think of the temptation, Dick,” replied Nina, with another saucy smile. “How would you like it yourself? And you were in pursuit of the same object. You can’t deny that, only he hit upon me first.”

“I was more sorry for the other villain,” said Lord Bearwarden, who had heard long ago the history of Gentleman Jim’s persecution of her ladyship. “He was a daring, reckless scoundrel, and I should like to have killed him myself, but it *did* seem hard lines to be shot by his own confederate in the row!”

“I pity that poor woman most of all,” observed Lady Bearwarden, with a sigh. “It is quite a mercy that she should have lost her senses. She suffered so dreadfully till her mind failed.”

“How is she?” “Have you seen her?” came from the others in a breath.

“I was with her this morning,” answered Maud. “She didn’t know me. I don’t think

she knows anybody. They can't get her to read, nor do needlework, nor even walk out into the garden. She's never still, poor thing! but paces up and down the room mumbling over a bent halfcrown and a knot of ribbon," added Lady Bearwarden, with a meaning glance at her husband, "that they found on the dead man's body, and keeps pressing it against her breast while she mutters something about their wanting to take it away. It's a sad, sad sight! I can't get that wild vacant stare out of my head. It's the same expression that frightened me so on her face that day by the Serpentine. It has haunted me ever since. She seemed to be looking miles away across the water at something I couldn't see. I wonder what it was. I wonder what she looks at now!"

"She's never been in her right senses, has she, since that dreadful night?" asked Nina. "If she were a lady, and well dressed, and respectable, one would say it's quite a romance. Don't you think perhaps, after all, it's more touching as it is?" and Nina, who liked to

make little heartless speeches she did not mean, looked lovingly on Dick, with her dark eyes full of tears, as she wondered what would become of her if anything happened to *him*!

“I can scarcely bear to think of it,” answered Maud, laying her hand on her husband’s shoulder. “Through all the happiness of that night—far, far the happiest of my whole life—this poor thing’s utter misery comes back to me like a warning and a reproach. If I live to a hundred I shall never forget her when she looked up to heaven from the long rigid figure with its fixed white face, and tried to pray, and couldn’t, and didn’t know how! Oh! my darling!”—and here Maud’s voice sank to a whisper, while the haughty head drooped lovingly and humbly towards her husband’s arm,—“what have I done that I should be so blessed, while there is all this misery and disappointment and despair in the world?”

He made no attempt at explanation. The philosophy of our Household Cavalry, like the religion of Napoleon’s “Old Guard,” is adapted

for action rather than casuistry. He did not tell her that in the journey of life for some the path is made smooth and easy, for others paved with flints and choked with thorns; but that a wise Director knows best the capabilities of the wayfarer, and the amount of toil required to fit him for his rest. So up and down, through rough and smooth, in storm and sunshine—all these devious tracks lead home at last. If Lord Bearwarden thought this, he could not put it into words, but his arm stole lovingly round the slender waist, and over his brave, manly face came a gentle look that seemed to say he asked no better than to lighten every load for that dear one through life, and bear her tenderly with him on the road to heaven.

“*C'est l'amour!*” laughed Nina; “that makes all the bother and complications of our artificial state of existence!”

“And all its sorrows!” said Lord Bearwarden.

“And all its sin!” said her ladyship.

“And all its beauty!” said Dick.

“And all its happiness!” added the painter, who had not yet spoken, from his seat under the acacia that grew by the water’s edge.

“Well put!” exclaimed the others, “and you need not go out of this dear little garden in search of the proof.”

But Simon made no answer. Once more he was looking wistfully on the river, thinking how it freshened and fertilized all about it as it passed by. Fulfilling its noble task—bearing riches, comforts, health, happiness, yet taking to deck its own bosom, not one of the humblest wild flowers that must droop and die but for its love. Consoler, sympathizer, benefactor, night and day. Gently, noiselessly, imperceptibly speeding its good work, making no pause, knowing no rest, till far away beyond that dim horizon, under the golden heaven, it merged into the sea.

THE END.

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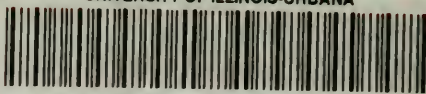
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